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Book of Dragons—Volume One

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Book Three in the Chronicles of Tiralainn—Volume One
Sara Reinke

PROLOGUE

OF DRAGONS AND FALCONS

"The dragons left us thousands of years ago," Aigiarn Chinuajin whispered to her son. Four-year-old Temuchin lay tucked against the chill of winter beneath blankets and furs, his dark eyes wide with wonder as he gazed up at her. The waning fire cast soft glow and dancing shadows across the inside of the *teger* and the boy's face.

"Where did they go?" Temu asked. He knew, of course; Aigiarn had told him this story countless times, but he always listened eagerly, as though each retelling was the first.

"To the west," she said, leaning over and kissing his brow. "Beyond the borders of the Nuqut and into the Khar mountains. They are sleeping there."

"In the lair," Temu whispered, and she smiled.

"Yes, *oyotona*," she said, calling him *field mouse* in their native Ulusian tongue.

"Ag'iamon called them there," Temu said. "He called them away from Ulus ... away from us. He brought them to the mountains so they could hide."

Aigiarn nodded. "Ag'iamon was the greatest dragon that ever lived," she said. "He was the golden dragon, lord of them all. He helped your ancestor, *theyeke Kagan* Borjigidal build an empire for us to share ... Ulusians and dragons. In all of history, in the entire world, Temu, no other people have ever been chosen by the dragons. There was a balance between us as intrinsic and sacred as the *Tegsh* itself ... the universal harmony of sky and earth, spirit and form."

"We rode the dragons," Temu said, his eyes bright and eager.

"Our ancestors did, yes."

"We could fly with them," he said.

"Once, the skies over Ulus were filled with dragonriders," Aigiarn said. "The sacred, chosen tribes of our people, and the dragons that had bound themselves to them."

"What did the dragons look like, Mamma?"

"They were beautiful," she said with a smile. "Red dragons and blue ones, green, black, white..."

"And gold," Temu whispered. "Ag'iamon was gold."

"He was the most beautiful of them all," she said. "They had crests on their heads and they could make music with them, cries that sounded for miles and miles. Their front legs, their feet..." She wiggled her fingertips at him. "Those were their wings. They could shrug them forward..." Aigiarn leaned over Temu, hunching her shoulders and planting her hands on either side of his head, mimicking the posture of a dragon, making him giggle. "...and walk like that. They were clumsy on the ground, but in the sky, oyotona ... in the air ... they were magnificent. They could soar over the treetops, sail among the clouds and the melody of their voices could reach every corner of the empire."

Temu's eyes grew troubled; a small cleft furrowed between his brows. "But they left us."

"Kagan Borjigidal had three wives," Aigiarn said. "Qatun Hoelun gave him a son ... Dobun ... before she died. His second gave him no heirs, but his third ... Qatun Mongoljin ... bore him another son, Duua. Though Dobun was heir to the empire by birthright, Mongoljin wanted it for Duua. When Borjigidal grew old and feeble, blind and sick, she saw her chance."

"She tricked him," Temu said.

"She poisoned Ag'iamon," Aigiarn said. "She knew Ag'iamon would leave the royal city of Kharhorin, that he would retreat into the mountains to die. She sent Dobun to find him. She told Dobun his father had begged it of him. Dobun loved his father very much, oyotona ... so much that he could never refuse him, no matter what. Dobun left Kharhorin and followed Ag'iamon into the Khar Mountains. It took him many long days to find the dragon lord, and by then, it was too late."

"Dobun's father, yeke Kagan Borjigidal was dead," Temu said, the pained furrow between his brows cleaving more deeply.

Aigiarn nodded. She worried sometimes that this story would upset Temu. He was too young to understand ambition, greed, treachery or deceit, but he understood love ... and the pain of loss. His own father, Aigiarn's husband Yesugei Bokeagha had been murdered when Temu had been only days old.

Though Temu had never known Yesugei, he longed to, and mourned for his father's absence with a poignancy that broke Aigiarn's heart.

She stroked her hand against his face. "Yes, oyotona," she said. "Mongoljin knew Borjigidal would not pass without telling Dobun good bye. She sent Dobun away and dressed her own son, Duua in Dobun's clothes. Borjigidal could not see, and when Mongoljin brought Duua before him, she told him it was Dobun. Borjigidal could feel Dobun's familiar clothes, smelled him in the fur and fabric, and believed her. He told his council, 'Here is my son, beloved to me as no other. All that I have ... my lands, peoples, fortresses, the whole of the Ulus empire ... shall be his ever more, and to his sons and blood kin.'"

"Ag'iamon knew when Borjigidal died," Temu said. "He sensed it."

"Yes," Aigiarn said. "Ag'iamon's instincts drove him from Kharhorin and to the solitude of the mountains when the time had come for his *sami suld* to leave this earth for the great spirit tree. His heart led him there, but his mind was bound to Borjigidal, almost as though they were one. He felt it when Borjigidal left this mortal plane; he sensed Mongoljin's trick, her deceit. He lived long enough for Dobun to find him, to tell Dobun what had come to pass."

"And then he took the dragons away," Temu said.

"What Mongoljin did violated the balance of the *Tegsh*," Aigiarn said. "She betrayed all of the dragons when she poisoned Ag'iamon. She destroyed the trust and love between our races and to punish her, Ag'iamon called the dragons to him. He summoned them from Ulus with a mighty cry from his crest that shook the mountainsides and trembled like wind in the air. He drew them west ... they flew among the peaks in exodus, leaving us behind."

She brushed Temu's hair back from his brow. "But Ag'iamon did not abandon us. Mongoljin and Duua ... and all of their heirs ... had to make amends for the breaking of the *Tegsh*. Ag'iamon promised Dobun that they would lose everything they had gained through their deceit. They would lose their empire; it would crumble around them, lost to them. The dragons would keep from them until atonement had been made ... until one day, when Dobun's heir would come to call the dragons out again, and to rebuild the fallen empire."

"The *Negh*," Temu whispered.

"The one, oyotona ... lord of dragons and men, who shares the spirits of both of these races within him. He will find the dragon lair in the mountains and he will command them. They will answer him; they will come to him. Ag'iamon said he would bear the mark of the Seven Sacred Stars of the Dologhon."

She tapped her fingertip against Temu's breast. Beneath the overlapping, fur-lined front of his *del*, he bore an unusual birthmark, a series of seven small marks arranged in a shape resembling the stellar constellation, Dologhon. "Ag'iamon told Dobun, 'By this mark, you shall know him. By this mark, he shall pass. By this mark, he shall call to us, and by this mark, we will rise.'"

Temu looked up at her as her voice faded and her mouth unfolded in a gentle smile. "It is time for bed, oyotona," she said, drawing his blankets toward his chin. "Close your eyes now."

"Not yet, Mamma," he said.

"Yes, yet," she said, kissing his nose.

"Not yet ... you forgot the *baga'han*," he told her and she laughed.

"Yes, I did."

"And the falcon."

"Yes, I did," Aigiarn said, laughing again. "You do not need to hear this story. You know it better than me. Bedtime now, Temu."

"No, Mamma," Temu said. "Please, just the rest of it. Just the baga'han and the falcon."

Aigiarn raised her brow as she looked down at him. "Temu..." she began.

"Please, Mamma?"

Aigiarn sighed. Temu did not plead anymore; she had relented and he knew it. He smiled at her, wriggling beneath his blankets.

"Ag'iamon sent the dragons to a secret lair hidden deep within the Khar mountains," Aigiarn said. "The only one who knew of the lair's location was a shaman of the baga'han, the little people of the west. He used his *hshimori*, his magic powers to seal the lair, to mark its doors with Ag'iamon's promise so the Negh would know it when he came to it. The shaman cut out his tongue and scarred his hands with fire so that he could never tell or write of the lair's location. When the shaman died, the secret of the dragons' lair died with him.

"When the Negh is born and the time comes for him to fulfill his destiny and travel deep into the mountains to wake the dragons, Ag'iamon promised he would beseech Keiden, the sky spirit of wind to send a falcon from the west to guide the Negh on his journey."

"A golden falcon," Temu whispered.

"A golden falcon, an unfamiliar breed we will have never seen before," Aigiarn said. "And when the golden falcon arrives from the west, it will lead the Negh into the Khar and to the dragons' lair." She smiled at him. "It will lead you there, Temu."

"Do you think I am the Negh, Mamma?" he asked softly.

"I know you are, oyotona," she said, kissing his forehead.

"Do you think I will get to ride a dragon some day?" he asked, his voice quiet but hopeful.

"You will get to rule the dragons some day," Aigiarn promised. "And men besides. But not tonight. Tonight, you get to sleep."

"Mamma..." he began, and she pressed her fingertips against his mouth, staying his voice.

"Sleep, Temu," she said. He nodded his head in reluctant concession. Aigiarn smiled and kissed him again. "*Oroin mend.*" *Good night.*

* * * *

Five years later, nine-year-old Temu awoke with a startled gasp in the middle of the night. He sat up from his pallet of woolen blankets and furs, his eyes flown wide in the darkness.

"Mamma?" he called out breathlessly, disoriented, his mind still befuddled with sleep.

The shadow-draped circumference inside the ger was quiet and empty. He realized Aigiarn was not there. He had fallen asleep curled on his side in front of her, but her bedding lay abandoned behind him, her blankets turned back and pushed aside. This was habit for Aigiarn anymore; she seldom slept for more than a few hours at a time, as though her mind remained so restless, her heart so troubled, she could not allow herself anymore respite than this.

She was likely out among the *burlagh* herd, he realized, keeping company with the night sentries of the *Kabtaut*. The burlagh, giant wooly rodents each about the girth and heft of an adult ram, made vulnerable targets in the night for wolves *ornarsana* that sometimes ventured down from the Khar foothills and into their *raysil* settlement.

Temuchin and Aigiarn lived among the Kerait tribe, a subset of people known as the Oirat. The Oirat were part of a larger race, the Ulusians; the Oirat were the last descendants of a once-fierce alliance of tribes that had rallied behind Dobun, the legendary, ancient prince of the last empire of Ulus, a man who according to legends had lost his rightful throne to his half-brother, Duua.

Temuchin's own distant cousin named Targutai now held that throne, the imperial title of *Kagan*, and he was said to be a descendant of Duua himself. His followers, called the Khahl waged war with the Oirat, chasing them throughout the steppelands and mountain foothills of the Nuqut region of Ulus, fighting with them, killing and enslaving them. Although the Ulus kingdom had dwindled from the mighty empire that had existed in Duua's time, and now was little more than a small, impoverished realm tucked between the Urlug mountains to the east and the Khar mountains to the west, ten years ago, the Khahl had found new allies in their oppressive efforts against the Oirat. When the enormous southern empire of Torach had established a united kingdom upon the Morthir continent, an alliance of the twelve largest, civilized territories, the Khahl had agreed to join their ranks. The Torachans helped bolster the faltering economy in the northern half of Ulus, the Taiga region, while also bringing massive squadrons of armored soldiers into the realm to help suppress and defeat the Oirat.

The Oirat lived as nomads in Nuqut, the last of their numbers ... four tribes, the Kerait, Basur, Uru'ut and Ganigas ... traveling throughout the steppes to avoid the Khahl and Torachans. They moved frequently, bringing with them their herds, wagons, gers and belongings, scraping an existence off of a land that sometimes seemed as bent upon seeing them beleaguered and defeated as their enemies. Winters were harsh, turning pastures and meadows into frost-encrusted tundra and snow-covered wastelands; summers were dry, drought-filled and fierce, driving them from the plains into the mountains for shelter.

Temu drew his legs out from beneath his blankets, and crawled toward the fire. It had dwindled into a smoldering pile of cinders and dim coals as he had slept, and he added kindling to it, prodding at the embers and blowing softly against them until small flames stoked, licking at the wood. It was *Noquai*, the eleventh month, and winter was upon them in full, bitter measure. Temu slept bundled in fur-lined pants with a heavily lined *del* fastened overtop, its long, fur-trimmed hem falling nearly to his ankles to keep him warm. Sleeping in thick hide gloves, layers of socks and his *guta*, thick-soled leather boots lined with wool felt and burlagh fur was common enough practice during the frigid months of winter, but even still, without the fire, chill seeped through Temu, and he shivered.

He leaned over the small blaze, closing his eyes and relishing its heat against his face. He closed his fingers about a small hide pouch dangling from a slender cord of sinew about his neck. The little bag was *anongon*, a talisman that was meant to keep his father's spirit near to him. He had no memory of Yesugei Bokeagha, but the ongon brought him comfort nonetheless. It contained some of Yesugei's ashes, a clipped lock of his hair, one of his teeth; more than totems to Temu, these served as tangible connections within his young mind to someone beloved and emulated.

Yesugei had been murdered by Khahl assassins serving Targutai's father, the former Kagan, Bujiragh. Aigiarn had managed to escape with Temuchin as the Khahl army had converged upon his father's tribe, the Naiman, massacring them and abducting them for slave trading. Aigiarn had fled to the sanctuary of the Keirat, and their leader, Toghrol Bagatur, Yesugei's *sanda*, or spiritual brother, as close as kin to

Temu's clan. They had lived among Toghrul and his people ever since.

The Khahl leader, Bujiragh had died soon after Yesugei's murder, under circumstances that remained peculiar and unexplained.

"He drowned in his bath," Yeb had told Temu once, when Temu had grown old enough to be curious about such things. Yeb Oyugundeï had been Yesugei's friend, *ayeke*, or *great* shaman to the Naiman tribe. Yeb had helped Aigiarn escape the Khahl massacre fourteen years ago, and remained one of Aigiarn's closest counsels and dearest friends. "Some say he fell asleep, drunk on wine. Others think it was Dobun's own spirit that visited him in the water, and held him beneath ... vengeance for his descendant's murder.

"Yesugei was blood kin to Dobun, and by that the rightful Kagan," Yeb said. "Just as you are, Temu, now that your father has passed. Bujiragh hated Yesugei for that alone ... as his son, Targutai will hate you."

"But he does not even know me," Temu had said, puzzled. "We have never even met. He is my kin, is he not?"

"Yes," Yeb had said. "Dobun and Duua, your ancestors, were brothers. The blood that flows through Targutai's veins runs in yours as well, Temu."

"That is rather foolish, do you not think, Yeb?" Temu asked. "To hate someone you do not even know just because of their clan."

Yeb had smiled at him. "Yes, Temu," he said. "It does seem rather foolish."

Yeb will know what my dream meant, Temu thought, drawing his legs beneath him and standing. He had always had peculiar dreams, for as long as he could remember, images had come to him in his sleep, signs and symbols that had seldom made sense to him. Yeb said Yesugei spoke to Temu through the dreams; the visions were messages from his father meant to help him in his life's journey, to lead him to his destiny. Yesugei was Temu's *sutha suld*, his spirit companion, a sort of mystical guide enjoyed by few outside of the shamans.

"It means you are special," Yeb had told him. "You have very strong *hiimori* about you. It will serve you well."

Temu had been dreaming of falcons, a strange and surrealistic vision he had suffered nearly every night for weeks now. He dreamed that he stood upon the seashore, the banks of the Qoyina Bay to the north of their encampment, before a large wooden boat that had been anchored in the shallow edge of the dark, icy water. Temu had been on boats before, small fishing vessels out upon Maral Lake, but this one was unlike any he had ever seen before, one suitable for sea voyages. It was long and graceful, stem and stern tapering upward into points, with a solitary mast rising from its center.

Temu dreamed that he was to travel somewhere aboard that boat. The name of his destination had come to him that night, like a soft voice whispering in his ear

Capua ... it will bring you to Capua

and he had gazed at the boat, mesmerized by its soft motions as it bobbed in the restless current.

He dreamed he had four birds with him, two pairs of pristine, ivory *gyrfalcons* perched in portable wooden mews. The Kerait raised falcons for hunting and trading; the *gyrfalcons* were especially prized in their neighboring realms of Lydia and Ebesun, and were often bartered for winter stores, food or coins.

Temu did not know why he had the raptors with him in the dream, only that it seemed important, something he was supposed to do.

As he stood there pondering the matters of falcons and boat, a soft cry from overhead drew his gaze. He dreamed of another falcon ... a golden one, its wings outstretched as it soared above him, flying out to sea.

He flew with the falcon, feeling the wind against his face. The bird carried him far from shore; it seemed to Temu as though they soared together over the ocean for many long days. The sun moved about them, arcing through the sky, passing the moon as the horizon shifted from day into night. At last, Temu spied a boat below, another ship, this one even more magnificent and enormous than the one at Qoyina Bay. It had three masts, three sets of mighty, unfurled sails and a spear of wood, an imposing shaft thrusting forth from the stem as though pointing the ship along its course.

The golden falcon had swooped toward the ship, and Temu plunged with it toward the broad wooden deck. He had cried out in terror, frightened by the sheer size and proximity of the boat ... not to mention the prospect of smashing headlong into it ... and then his voice had faded, his eyes widening with wonder.

"What kind of name is that?" he heard a man ask in a friendly voice.

Temu dreamed that he stood upon the deck of the ship, trembling in bewildered awe. Sunlight spilled across the polished planks of the floor; shadows cast by the sails as they canted lightly on a current of air danced softly about his feet. The falcon had come to land in front of him near a tangled series of thick ropes and wooden pulleys descending from the rigging overhead. Here, two men stood by a railing overlooking the sea, talking and laughing with one another.

"What do you mean?" asked one, the corner of his mouth lifted in an affable smile. He was very tall, with hair the golden color of blanched witchgrass in late summer that fell down to below his waist in length.

His friend was also tall, lean and lanky in his build. He had dark skin, darker than Temu's own golden hue, a richer shade of brown. He had dark hair like an Ulusian, but thicker, coarser. "I mean, I thought your names had to mean something," he said. He turned around to face Temu, leaning his hips back against the railing and grinning broadly. "You know, 'squirrel-hindquarters,' 'babbling brook' or something."

They were dressed in funny clothes, like the noblemen from Torach who would sometimes cross Nuquten route for Kharhorin in the north, with starched white stockings, pants that buttoned at their knees, heavy coats that fit them snugly through the chests and flared about their legs and hips in broad panels of embroidered fabric. Their shoes were polished and heeled, adorned with large gold buckles, and they both wore ruffled folds of fabric swathed about their throats, tucked into long vests beneath their coats.

They spoke together in the popular tongue, the language of Torach that over the last millennia had infiltrated and dominated nearly every culture known. They spoke oddly to Temu, however; their voices inflected with an unusual, clipped dialect that lent a lilting, nearly melodic sound to the flow of their words.

"They were never meant to be names," said the other, with the long hair. "They are clan symbols, not designations. We used to refer to ourselves by patrolineal order. We did not have any trouble differentiating among ourselves in such fashion. It was not until you arrived that we seemed to feel some

great need for surnames."

The wind fluttered the man's hair behind him, and Temu blinked, startled. His ear was pointed, like that of a wolf, not rounded as Temu's, or even those of his friend. His ear was where a man's should be ... on the side of his head ... but the tip tapered upward into a distinctive point, as though someone had pinched it roughly and maimed it.

"Oh, yes, blame it on the menfolk and our incessant need for simple introduction rather than lengthy pontification," the dark-haired man laughed. "Come now, tell me. I am curious. What does it mean, the name *Fabhcun*?"

The man with the long blond hair, the pointed ears turned toward Temu in the dream, and Temu froze in fright, drawing back as the man's gaze seemed to find his own. The man blinked at him, startled.

"Rhyden?" his friend said, looking somewhat puzzled.

The man continued to stare at Temu for a long moment, but his face was not unkind. He looked young to Taemir, and somewhat weary. His eyes were round, his nose long and tapered, his pallor fair, all like the visitors from Torach Temu had gleaned a peek at in passing over the years. He seemed to gaze straight through Temu to the floor, his expression perplexed, and then he smiled, glancing over his shoulder.

"Falcon," he said, startling the breath from Temu. "My name, *Fabhcun* means *falcon* in Gaeilgen."

"What are you looking at?" the other man asked, stepping forward. "I just had these decks holystoned and swabbed ... there had best not be a scuff on my planks."

The man with the unusual ears and the name *offalcon* turned one last time, glancing toward Temu, apparently without seeing him this time. "Nothing," he said. "It is nothing, Aedhir. A peculiar shadow drew my gaze, that is all."

* * * *

"What do you think it means, Yeb?" Temu asked. He had found the shaman exactly where he had expected to ... alone in a small cave, *amanduaga* weathered into the cragged rocks of the granite foothills rippling the plains. Narsana had likely once used the cave for a den, but Yeb had adopted it upon their arrival, using it as a place of solitude and sanctuary. He had anointed the stones with a wide variety of rituals, incenses and ongons, saying it was a sacred place, that the spirits could speak to him easily within its confines. Yeb spent a great deal of time here, often in counsel with other shamans, tending small fires in the center of the room and performing ceremonies.

Temu had sat across from Yeb by the fire, sipping from a cup of warmed *qumis*, or fermented milk the shaman had offered him. He had related the dream while Yeb listened quietly. Like many Oirat men, Yeb kept his pate shaved nearly to the cap of his skull, his black hair draping down toward his shoulders from here, twisted into a plait that ran down to the small of his back. The exposed measure of his forehead and crown gave his face a pleasing, round appearance, accentuating the contrast of his sternly set brows and gentle eyes.

"What do *you* think it means, Temu?" Yeb replied. He cradled a small ongon against his palm, a leather pouch that harbored Ogotai, his utha spirit guide. Yeb had explained to Temu that Ogotai was an ancestral spirit from his clan, one of Yeb's forefathers from ages past that spoke to him sometimes, and offered him prophecies of the future, visions of the spirit worlds.

"I ... I do not know," Temu replied, his brows drawing slightly as he stared down at his qumis. "I keep dreaming of falcons. Is it a message from my father, do you think? He is trying to tell me it is time, that the falcon is coming to lead me to the dragons' lair?"

"Ogotai has shown me the falcons as well," Yeb said. "Four white gyrs, as you saw, and a golden in flight. I did not see the ships you described, but some visions are not intended for more than one to see."

"I saw a man, too, Yeb," Temu said, troubled. He pinched his own ongon, his father's talisman about his neck and tugged at it absently. "Not just a falcon and boats ... a man, as well. He had long hair and strange ears ... pinched at the tops, pointed. I saw his face clearly ... just for a moment. He looked at me, Yeb, as though he saw me and then he turned away, but I remember his face. His hair and skin were pale, his eyes were round, his nose long ... like the Torachans. He said his name meant *falcon*, in another language ... *Gailjin*, I think. I do not understand what it means, or why I would dream of such things."

"What do you think these visions mean?" Yeb asked again, his voice quiet enough to draw Temu's gaze from his cup. Yeb would often play this gentle game with Temu; Temu would ask him of things, and Yeb would reply with questions of his own, inquiries meant to make Temu mull matters over and decide for himself.

Temu looked at him, frowning slightly. "I think they mean we should find my mother and Toghrul among the herd," he said. "If Ogotai has shown them to you, too, it must be something important. It must mean it is time. They will need to know."

"Alright, then," Yeb said, nodding his head once.

"We should tell Toghrul to gather two mating pairs of white gyrfalcons," Temu said. "And some of the soldiers from his Kelet. We should ready ourselves for a trip."

"Where would you see us go, Temu?" Yeb asked.

Temu lowered his face, looking down at the ongon against his hand. He curled his fingers about it, feeling the small, but distinctive lump of his father's tooth within the pouch press through the felt-lined hide of his glove. "To the Qoyina Bay," he said. "The Uru'ut aysil is still there. They fish in the harbor ... they might have small sailing boats like the first one I saw in my dream."

"Alright, then," Yeb said, nodding again.

"We will sail west for Capua," Temu said, glancing up at the shaman. "Something will happen there ... something will be waiting for us. A golden falcon, this man ... I do not know, but it will be there."

"Alright," Yeb said, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly in a smile.

"We should leave right away, as soon as we can. I do not know how much time we have, but it cannot be much."

"As you wish," Yeb said, lowering his head in respectful deference.

"Is ... is that what you would do, Yeb?" Temu asked him, and the shaman raised his eyes, meeting his gaze.

"No," Yeb replied. "It is what you would do, Temu." He drew his legs beneath him and stood, the lined folds of his del settling into place against his legs, the hem falling to his ankles. He gazed down at Temu and smiled again. "And that is good enough for me."

Chapter One

OLD FRIENDS AND NEW ACQUAINTANCES

Whoever said Elves never fall ill obviously never put an Elf on a boat, Rhyden Fabhcun thought to himself as he clutched the wooden railing along the forecastle of *thea'Maorga* and heaved the remnants of his breakfast over the side of the frigate into the Muir Fuar sea.

They were two days out upon the water, with Tiralainn behind them as they sailed for Samos Bay along the Morthirian coast. Rhyden had made the seafaring voyage between the Torachan capital city of Cneas and Tiralainn nearly a dozen times in his life, but no matter how often he settled his feet upon a ship, it took him nearly a week in full before his bewildered, land-acquainted mind would allow his stomach any respite against the undulating, churning motions of ocean current and hull.

He felt his stomach twist again and he leaned further over the railing, spitting a mouthful of bitter, thick bile into the cleft of foam carved by *thea'Maorga's* prow. He tucked his long blond hair back behind the tapered edges of his ears and moaned softly, closing his eyes, feeling dizzy and miserable.

"Hoah, now, not so far out there," a voice said near his ear, as a hand settled firmly against his shoulder, drawing Rhyden away from the railing. "I do not think I have ever seen an Elf lose his balance before, but there is always a first for everything."

Rhyden shrugged the palm away from his coat, frowning. He brought the cuff of his hand to his mouth, brushing at his lips as he blinked as his would-be intercessor. "I ... I am alright," he said, his voice hoarse.

Aedhir Fainne, captain of *thea'Maorga*, smiled at him, his brow arched. He was of Median descent, a race of men from the southern portion of the civilized Morthir; like any of his heritage, he had a complexion the dusky hue of deeply steeped tea. His headful of thick black curls were kept short-cropped and neatly trimmed away from his handsome, angular face, his high, etched cheeks and austere brow. His was a face well attuned for expressing great warmth and fondness, or intense severity with only the minutest of inflections.

"Have not found your sea-legs yet, Lord Fabhcun?" he asked.

Rhyden closed his eyes, pressing his palm against his brow. "No," he said, shaking his head. "Those I have found. It is my sea-stomach that I would yet seem to be missing."

Aedhir laughed. He offered Rhyden a clap on the shoulder and then turned his head, calling behind him toward the spar deck. "Pryce, find me a chair, would you? Bring it up to the quarterdeck."

"Aye, sir," Aedhir's First Officer, Pryce Finamur called back. Like most aboard *thea'Maorga*, whose seafaring lifestyle offered little time upon their native soil of Tiralainn, Pryce was still relatively unaccustomed to the presence of an Elf aboard the ship. Elves did not travel by their nature; an Elf on a ship, crossing the ocean was something akin to a cat hopping willingly into a filled rain-barrel. The tars and landsmen comprising *thea'Maorga's* crew seemed evenly divided in their numbers between gawking

at Rhyden as some manner of curiosity, or glowering at him, clearly indicating his state of unwelcome. Pryce, at least, seemed polite enough in his regard, if not somewhat fascinated by Rhyden, and the young officer paused an extra moment upon the main deck, blinking at Rhyden before turning and tending to Aedhir's request.

"Come with me," Aedhir said to Rhyden, leading him away. "You are not helping yourself here. Stand amid-ship, or abaft the main mast. The pitching is less."

Rhyden knew Aedhir vaguely; the two were cordial strangers at best, each more acquainted with the other by name and reputation than anything else. They had both served in the First Shadow War in Tiralainn together twenty years earlier, and despite the fact they had each participated in different campaigns in those days, such experience had seemed to establish Rhyden as a friend in Aedhir's regard. Rhyden served as ambassador for the neighboring realms of Tiralainn and Tirurnua to the united kingdom of the Morthir. He was returning to the capital city of Cneas to resume his ambassadorial duties, and Aedhir, an experienced commander in the Crown Navy of Tiralainn had graciously offered him passage at no fare.

Aedhir brought Rhyden to the quarterdeck and they stood together beside the main mast, facing the port side of the ship. Aedhir kept his hand against Rhyden's shoulder the entire time, helping to steady him as he stumbled along.

"Look out toward the horizon," Aedhir told him. Pryce walked briskly across the deck from behind them, bearing a slat-backed wooden chair in his hand. "Good, set it there," Aedhir said, motioning with his hand. "Sit down, Lord Fabhcun. Keep your eyes out on the water toward the horizon and relax."

Rhyden sat and looked at Aedhir somewhat uncertainly as the captain squatted beside him. "I have never decided which is the worst of being seasickened," Aedhir remarked. "The wretchedness of it all, or the indignity."

"The indignity," Rhyden said, making Aedhir smile.

"There is not a man on this ship who has not offered his gut's homage to the waves before ... and let none of them tell you otherwise," he said. "Myself included."

Aedhir stood, tugging against the lapels of his tailored blue justicoat, settling his uniform into place. "Try to keep your head and shoulders balanced above your hips as the ship moves," he said. "Do not fight the sea's rhythm ... follow it. Try that seated awhile, and then we shall walk a bit."

Rhyden watched Aedhir walk away, with Pryce Finamur falling in step with him. "How do we fare by the wind?" Aedhir asked his first officer as they approached the helm together. He raised his hand and nodded his chin in greeting to his helmsman and lieutenant on deck.

"Scudding both sheets aft to a fair wind in a long sea, Captain," Pryce replied. "We are making excellent time."

"Hoah, fall not off, then," Aedhir said, canting his face skyward, admiring his rigging. "I am going to find our Lord Fabhcun some tea. A spot of wehnroot might serve him good."

* * * *

In time, Rhyden's seasickness had passed, as had his feelings of uncertainty about sailing with Aedhir. Thea'*Maorga's* commissioned and warrant officers, at least, seemed to warm to him, and while the rest

of the crew did not necessarily follow suit, they at least granted Rhyden a wide and relatively quiet berth, keeping their misgivings and poor opinions among themselves.

Aedhir proved to be a difficult man to dislike. Other ship captains Rhyden had met had been polite enough to him, by his title of ambassador alone if nothing else, but Aedhir seemed genuine in his efforts at friendship. He had established the habit of inviting Rhyden to join him and his two young midshipmen, Wenham Poel ... known as "Wen" ... and Odhran Frankley about the ship each morrow, teaching them about the frigate's design, the intricacies of her rigging.

"Pirates thought they might send a twenty-pounder across our bow along shore near Cradle Bay three month ago," Aedhir said one morning as they walked together along the spar deck. They were now almost three weeks fully into the voyage, and expected to reach Cneas' Samos Bay in less than four days. "We were bearing in with the land when they sent out the round. Damn near missed the ship in full, save they clipped the side of the main topmast, split the sail, the bloody bastards."

"How did they get cannons, sir?" Wen asked, breathless with wonder and trepidation at the mere mention of pirates. Cannons, or more specifically the black powder used to fire them, were relatively new devices, introduced within the last decade by the Abhacans of Tirurnua. The technology was not readily available outside of the military in Tiralainn, and the two kings of the neighboring realms had not shared it with anyone on the Morthir.

"They stole them," Aedhir replied. "Bloody bastards. They do that, you know. Raid our ships, kill our crewmen, plunder our cargo, steal our weapons." He took notice of the fact that this statement seemed to leave the midshipman, Odhran, visibly ill-at-ease and he smiled. "But not us, lad. Do not worry for it. There is not a vessel afloat that can best the *Maorga*. She is the fastest frigate on the Muir Fuar ... mast cracked or not."

"What did you do, Captain?" Wen asked. He was a young lad, little more than twenty, lean, lanky and wide-eyed, with his shoulder-length tumble of black waves caught at the nape of his neck in a tail. Like Aedhir, he was of Median descent; though his complexion was a lighter tawny shade than the captain's.

Odhran was a good full head taller than Wen, and far more squat. He was large and stocky, thick through chest and hips like a well-kept bull. He and Wen were schoolmates together at the university in Tiralainn's royal city, Belgaeran. The younger sons of affluent noblemen, they had abandoned their studies for lives in the Crown Navy, and Aedhir's was the first ship they had worked in their lives.

"We used the spare topsail from the hold and sprinted the mast, of course," Aedhir replied. "Cannot rightly sail without them. The mast only cracked a bit by the cap ... she is a tough one, my lady ... and we fished it for support, splinted and bound it nearly new. Should have seen it replaced at Cuan'darach in Tiralainn, but we left port six weeks earlier than we had planned."

Rhyden had overheard grumblings among the crew that Aedhir had called them all back early from their shore leave on his account, because Aedhir had agreed to bring him to Cneas. It was an arrangement Rhyden had been unaware of ... and felt badly about, for it certainly accounted for some of the ill will the crew members harbored toward him.

"No, sir, I mean the pirates," Wen said, shaking his head. "What did you do about the pirates?"

"We tacked to starboard and kept full," Aedhir said. "We stood in and outran the bastards."

"You did not return fire?" Wen asked, seeming somewhat disappointed by this notion.

Aedhir laughed. "I did not want to waste my King's cannonballs." He nodded his chin skyward. "Why do you both not go aloft, tell me how that patchwork fares."

"Aye, Captain," Wen said, beaming eagerly at the prospect of scrambling up the ratlines toward the middle of the main mast.

Odhran did not share his friend's enthusiasm, to judge by his sudden, hesitant expression. As Wen moved for the shrouds, Odhran remained rooted in place upon the main deck, blinking down at the polished toes of his shoes.

"Come on, Odhran!" Wen called out, already scurrying up the ropes.

"Wen is going to beat you to the top, lad, lest you get your feet moving," Aedhir said, referring to the *top*, or platform near the head of the lower mast rather than the pinnacle of the mast itself.

"I ... I am not one much for heights, sir," Odhran said, his brows pinched, his gaze still toward the deck.

"Well, that is good then," Aedhir said. "As I am not sending you into the heights. Only the midpoint." Odhran glanced up at him, somewhat stricken. "Bear a'hand now, Odhran," Aedhir told him gently. "Up you go."

Odhran sighed as though sentenced to the gallows, his shoulders slumping. "Aye, Captain," he said, turning about and skulking toward the shrouds.

"A lad his size intimidated by heights," Aedhir remarked. He shook his head and turned to Rhyden. "Everything is an adventure at their age. Do you remember?"

"I try not to," Rhyden replied, making Aedhir laugh. "I have had enough adventure in my lifetime to suit me, I think."

Aedhir put his hands on his hips, lifting his gaze and watching the boys' progress. "Yes, I heard," he said. "You just finished another round of adventures in Tiralainn, did you not?" He glanced at Rhyden. "Tornadoes, Lahnduren, plots against the King, a revolt by the a'Pobail Creideamh cadre, bloody battles, a prison rescue, a kidnapped Queen ... and you in the midst of it. I even heard rumors of magic involved."

Rhyden smirked, pretending his gaze was absorbed fully in the two lads aloft. "There is another I have had enough of."

"Do you believe in magic, Rhyden?" Aedhir asked. They had long since abandoned formal protocol between them for the comfortable address of given names. If Aedhir was feeling particularly chipper, he might even fondly refer to Rhyden as "falcon," a nickname he had coined when Rhyden had made the mistake more than a week ago of telling him what his surname, *Fabhcun* meant in the native Gaelic tongue of the Elves.

"Do you, Aedhir?" Rhyden asked, raising his brow, glancing at his friend. "Believe in magic?"

Aedhir was quiet for a long, thoughtful moment, his face turned towards the main sail. "At the end of the First War, I saw Damantas emerge from a mirror as though they walked through an opened doorway," he said at length. "I watched one of them run his broadsword through Kierken ... the Elf who is now my

King. I also watched a maple tree grant some of its life, its vigor that Kierken might live.” He smirked. “That was twenty years ago, and I have not seen the likes since. I do not know if it was magic or not. All I know is ... like you ... it was enough for me.”

Rhyden laughed, shaking his head. He pointed toward the head of the main topmast. “Odhran made it.”

“I knew he would,” Aedhir said, pleased. “You cannot rightly fear something forever. Sooner or later, you must stand against it.”

“*Muise*,” Rhyden murmured, watching as Wen clapped Odhran on the back and the two young men stood together on the platform, grinning broadly with excitement as they gazed out upon the expansive ocean. *Indeed.*

* * * *

Though Aedhir did everything within his power along the voyage to lure Rhyden forth from the berth deck, most mornings between the midshipmen instruction and lunch found Rhyden alone in the confines of his stateroom.

Rhyden liked Aedhir, and was grateful for such distractions, but yet felt very much a stranger aboard the *a'Maorga*. He found fleeting but familiar comfort in his moments of solitude.

He had lived for nearly fifteen years in Cneas as Kierken's ambassador. Most people on the Morthir had never seen an Elf before, and anyplace he went, Rhyden garnered stares and gawking. As a result, he spent a great deal of time in his home, a small flat he kept in Cneas, surrounding himself with his work or books, seldom venturing out unless it was to trek into the Morthirian wilderlands. He enjoyed visiting the northeastern portions of Torach and its neighboring realms of Lydia and Bagahan. Here, he could be anonymous among the pine forests and foothills, away from ogling eyes and fervent whispers amidst rushing streams that drained mountain snowmelt, or expansive meadowlands that reminded him poignantly, vividly of the part of Tiralainn in which he had spent his boyhood.

In his native land, Rhyden was regarded as a hero; tales of his exploits in the First War and then again during the Second Shadow War five years later had swelled from fact to ridiculous fantasy. Thus, even when he returned home, he found himself subjected to the same curious attention that followed him relentlessly in Torach. It seemed he found no escape wherever he turned, saved for his own home, his own bed chamber.

Thus, solitude had become very much a habit to him, if only to escape a life that seldom saw him anonymous anywhere. He had let relationships falter for it with friends in Tiralainn, even his own kin. However, his last visit to Belgaeran had not been all adventure and battles, and he had surprised himself by enjoying time spent rekindling these old and once-tender ties.

“I do not know why I am going back to Cneas,” Rhyden had admitted to Aedhir two nights ago. They had stood together on the poop deck, admiring the moon, drinking brimague and smoking *toitins*, aromatic herbs wrapped in thin paper. “There is really nothing for me there.”

“Fifteen years in a city and you have nothing waiting for you?” Aedhir asked, glancing at him, arching his brow.

Rhyden laughed. “Pathetic, is it not?”

Aedhir pursed his lips and blew a wispy smoke ring skyward. “I think that is mayhap the most pathetic

thing I have ever heard," he remarked with a chuckle, making Rhyden laugh again. "If you have nothing in Cneas, why in the bloody blue Bith would you go back there?"

Rhyden shrugged, his smile faltering. "I used to think there was nothing for me in Tiralainn, either," he said.

Rhyden sat with his shoulders against the bulkhead of his small stateroom, his knees drawn towards his chest. He held a book in his hands, a collection of poems written by his younger brother, Taemir called *Midmorning Ramblings and Other Prose of Relative Inconsequence*. Taemir was sixteen years Rhyden's junior, and one of the most renowned authors in all of Tiralainn. It was not until this last visit that Rhyden had really grown to know Taemir, to find endearing accord with his personality and habits, and to grow fond of the bloody little bastard despite his most stubborn efforts to the contrary. It occurred to Rhyden that he missed Taemir ... in fact, he missed quite a few friends and relations with whom he had grown reacquainted ... and this left him feeling rather forlorn.

"I will make a deal with you, Rhyden," Aedhir had said on the poop deck, drawing in on his toitin and letting smoke waft in a thin stream from his nose.

"What is that?"

"I will be laid up in Cneas for six weeks while my main topmast is replaced," Aedhir said. "After that, I suppose there are some things I need to see tended to in Tiralainn."

"What sort of things?" Rhyden had asked.

Aedhir shrugged, smiling slightly. "Nonsense, really," he had said. "But it would see me west once more is my point." He glanced at Rhyden. "If you should decide to return."

Rhyden blinked at him, and then turned his gaze out towards the black, shimmering surface of the sea.

"I know you have your duties and all, and you have been already gone from them awhile," Aedhir said. "Six weeks might be enough to get affairs together, see someone in your stead until Kierken finds another ambassador, do you not think?"

"It might, indeed, Aedhir," Rhyden said quietly, watching moonlight dance in pale shards upon the water.

"I might have to make you pay fare next time 'round," Aedhir had told him with a crooked smile and Rhyden had lowered his head, laughing softly.

"That would be fair," he had replied.

He had been thinking of Aedhir's offer ever since. Once, he might have thought himself daft for even considering such a thing; abandoning his position in Torach would have struck him as unconscionable. All at once, however, in Rhyden's mind, it seemed something not only feasible, but appealing.

He heard a soft rap against his stateroom door and lifted his head. "Yes?" he said.

The door opened a brief measure and the young midshipman, Wen Poel poked his head inside. "Begging your pardon, sir."

"It is quite alright, Wen," Rhyden said, setting the book of poems on his bunk and rising. "Come inside, le

do thoil.” Please.

Wen did not seem as uncomfortable in his presence as some of his shipmates. Living in Belgaeran, attending the university had awarded him a far broader exposure to Elves than most of his fellows aboard *thea'Maorga*. He opened the door in full, but remained politely poised upon the threshold, clasping his hands together against the small of his back. “Captain Fainne has asked me to tell you that lunch is prepared, if you would join the officers in the wardroom.”

“Yes, thank you,” Rhyden said. He had removed his justicoat earlier, draping it across his cot and turning back his sleeve cuffs to his elbows. He unrolled his sleeves in turn, retrieving his cufflinks from his washstand and fastening them in place. “You did very well today,” he said as he glanced toward Wen in the doorway. “Climbing the shrouds to the top mainmast took some mettle.”

“Thank you, sir,” Wen said, visibly pleased by the compliment. “I have never feared heights too much.”

“That should serve you well as a Naval officer, then,” Rhyden said.

“I should hope so, yes, sir,” Wen replied, nodding his chin once, the corner of his mouth lifting in a quick smile. “My father said once that you should fear nothing lest you try it first, decide for yourself whether or not it is worth the trouble.”

Rhyden laughed, shrugging his way into his justicoat. “That is good advice. Your father sounds like a wise man.”

“He is, yes, sir,” Wen said, offering another fleeting, pleased smile.

“He must be proud of you.”

“I ... I should hope for that as well, yes, sir,” Wen said.

“Tell me, lad, what do they serve us for lunch today?” Rhyden asked, walking toward the door.

Wen turned aside in polite deference to allow Rhyden to pass. “Stewed cabbage and root vegetables, sir, with salted pork and biscuits.”

Rhyden smiled. “I suppose, given your father's philosophy, I ought to at least try it first before I grow afraid of it.”

Wen laughed, abandoning courteous protocol for a moment. “I suppose it so, yes, sir,” he said.

* * * *

Later that evening, as dusk settled upon the sea and the sky draped down upon the water in shadows yielding only to the first, faint pinpoints of starlight, Aedhir sat alone in his cabin. The small chamber was filled with the warm glow of lantern light, and he sat at his desk, a tumbler of brimague in one hand ... his fourth or fifth; he could not be certain, for he usually lost count of them within his mind after the third ... and a note set to parchment in the other.

The letter had been waiting for him upon his arrival at the Cuan'darach port in Tiralainn nearly five weeks earlier. It had been delivered to the Naval offices at the harbor almost a month in full before that, and they had held it for him. The contents of the correspondence had nearly broken him; the effect was no less profound or poignant now as he read them again for at least the ten-thousandth time.

Dearest Father...

I am writing to you in tears, my heart broken to know you are alive. For seventeen years, Mother has told me you were dead, that you had been lost at sea. She has been methodical and cruel in her attempts to keep you from me, and I have only learned the truth of her deceit tonight, when I found all of your letters. She kept them hidden in a box inside her closet ... every correspondence you have sent to me all of this time, hundreds of letters, so many tender words and endearments that I wept to hold them.

She told me you were dead, and I believed her. All of these years, I have mourned for you and missed you, and she let me bear the burden of my despair, all of the while knowing you yet drew breath. I cannot forgive her for this ... I will not forgive her for what she has done to us both. She has used me to hurt you, surely realizing the terrible pain my lack of reply to your letters must have brought to you. I cannot believe the breadth of her treachery even to realize it in full. I am pained beyond measure, furious beyond reason.

I love you, Father. My love for you has never waned, no matter what she might have led you to believe. I have always loved you, and I always will. I must decide what to do. I must clear my head and heart and decide. I will write to you again soon.

Yours ... Aelwen

Aedhir pressed the rim of his glass to his mouth and canted his head back, draining the brimague in a long swallow. He set the tumbler aside and traced his fingertips along the sloping lines of his daughter's handwriting. *I love you, Father.* He had waited seventeen years to hear those words once more. When last he had seen Aelwen, she had been a child, a little girl. She would be grown now, a young woman of twenty-three. He had tried many times over many years to imagine what she looked like, what her voice sounded like, her laughter, but these efforts only left him crestfallen.

He folded the parchment page neatly and slipped it into his desk drawer. He stood and turned, looking out of the stern windows behind him, the broad circumference of panes awarding him a nearly panoramic view of the dusk-swathed sea and sky.

A soft knock against his door drew his gaze over his shoulder. "Yes?" Aedhir said.

Pryce Finamur opened the door and stepped inside. At the sight of the young man, Aedhir's troubled expression softened, and he smiled. "Hullo, Pryce," he said. "Come in, close the door. It is alright."

"I hope I do not interrupt you, sir," Pryce said, closing the door behind him. He remained near the threshold, tucking his hands together against the small of his back.

"Not at all," Aedhir replied.

"The second dog-watch is posted, sir," Pryce said. "The topgallants are brailed for the night and I have completed the log entries, sir. Lieutenant Haely has the quarterdeck, with Master Miell at the helm and orders for nothing-off, sir."

Aedhir had known the young man for almost his entire life; they had sailed together since Pryce had been a mere scrap of a lad. He still looked more this boy than a man, at least in Aedhir's fond regard, and Aedhir had always thought of Pryce as dearly as he might have a son.

"Very good, Lieutenant," Aedhir told him, and Pryce smiled, nodding his chin in polite deference.
"Would you care for a brimague?"

"Yes, thank you," Pryce replied as Aedhir crossed the quarters towards a small table where he kept his brimague decanter and glasses. "Nodystanuir tonight?"

Aedhir chuckled as he refilled his drink and poured a shot for Pryce. "No. I think our Lord Fabhcun has grown weary of me winning all of his marks at cards," he said, glancing at Pryce and grinning. "He made up some pretense to retire to his stateroom. I let him think I believed him."

He motioned to Pryce with his finger, and the young man followed him over to a pair of comfortably upholstered chairs. They sat facing one another and Aedhir offered his glass in toast to Pryce. "*Slainte*, lad," he said.

"*Slainte*, Captain," Pryce said, smiling as he tapped the edge of his tumbler against Aedhir's. They both enjoyed long swallows of brimague, and then Aedhir settled himself comfortably in his chair. "I offered him passage back to Tiralainn once the mast is replaced in Cneas," he said.

"It should have been replaced in Cuan'darach," Pryce said. He spoke as himself now, as might a son, and not a fledgling officer before his captain, and Aedhir looked at him, smiling.

"I know, Pryce," he said with a nod.

It was a discussion they had held before, many times even before leaving the Cuan'darach harbor. Pryce obviously knew it was a moot point to pursue; he sighed somewhat wearily.

"Why would Lord Fabhcun return to Tiralainn so soon?" he asked.

"It is his home," Aedhir said. "He has been away from it for awhile now, and I think this last visit stoked something within him. Loneliness, mayhap. He wants to return."

"Do you think it is wise?"

"It is his decision to make. Who am I to counsel him one way or the other?"

"No, Aedhir," Pryce said. "Do you think it wise to bring him aboard again?" His expression grew sheepish and he looked down at the tapestry rug beneath his feet. "There are many among the crew who are not pleased by his presence."

"They are not pleased because he is an Elf," Aedhir said. "Nothing more. If any of them would give him a chance, they would find he is right affable and decent-natured."

"They are displeased nonetheless, sir."

"Let them be," Aedhir said with a frown. "Rhyden Fabhcun is a good man ... Elf or no ... and my friend. It is my ship, and if I say he is welcome here, then he is bloody damn welcome. Anyone who is displeased with it can take the matter up with me."

"They say he will bring bad luck upon us," Pryce said quietly.

"What bad luck? We have enjoyed nothing but fair winds and favorable seas since leaving Cuan'darach. If that is poor fortune, I say, heap it on. Woe to us all. And before you tell me they think Rhyden is the reason we left Tiralainn early, I know they think this ... and you can tell them he is not."

"Then why did we leave?" Pryce asked.

Aedhir chuckled, draining his glass. He stood, walking across the room to refill it. "We left because it was for the best."

"Oh, well, that clarifies everything," Pryce said dryly.

"We left because I punched Vaughan Ultan," Aedhir said, his eyes upon his tumbler as he poured himself another two-fingers' worth of liquor. "Is that better for you?"

Pryce was quiet behind him, his lack of reply speaking volumes, and Aedhir sighed heavily, looking over his shoulder at the young man. "It was a mistake, I admit it. A rather unfortunate incident right after the Samhradh festival ended. The constable was called. I made a hasty retreat before his arrival, though I am sure I will be brought to answer for it eventually. I simply did not feel like it at the time."

Vaughan Ultan was a noble lord, his family one of the oldest and wealthiest in Belgaeran. He was also the man Aedhir's wife, Iona had married for seventeen years earlier, the man who, before this, Iona had buggered behind Aedhir's back while he was out to sea; the man who ... in Aedhir's opinion ... had stolen his wife and daughter.

"Why did you hit him?" Pryce asked.

Aedhir laughed. "The better question, Pryce, would be why did I not hit him sooner?"

Aedhir and Iona had met when they were both very young, in the dark and turbulent years of Tiralainn's First Shadow War. They had each been members of a rebellion movement called the Fiainas, a small cadre of men against the rule of a tyrannical Elf King named Lahnduren who had terrorized his realm, butchering and enslaving his people. Aedhir and Iona had married in the Fiainas sanctuary of the Ulaimhas'salann mines, an ancient, subterranean maze of caverns and tunnels. Aedhir had been twenty-one years old, and poignantly in love with Iona, tender sentiments she had seemed to share. Aelwen had been born to them among the caves, and all had seemed well until the war had ended.

He might have taken an appointment to the royal court in Belgaeran instead of the Navy. That had been what Iona wanted; she had not made even the faintest effort to disguise her disappointment when he chose the latter. He had tried to explain to her, make it up to her and Aelwen by buying them a home, a modest but comfortable house in Leys, near the royal city, but even his best efforts had not appeased her. Iona had grown up a peasant in an impoverished village. She wanted luxuries and wealth, the pleasures of an affluent life in Belgaeran, and in the end, Aedhir supposed she had found it.

She had left him with a note. He had returned from the sea to the house in Leys only to find it empty, save for the letter which waited for him, folded and sealed, propped against the mantle.

Dear Aedhir, Iona had written. Like anyone else, we both seek some measure of happiness and fulfillment in our lives. You have found yours, and now, at last, I have found mine, as well. It is regrettable that we no longer share the same hearts and minds on such matters, but mayhap it is to be expected. We married in the folly of youth, though you cannot call the arrangement between us "marriage" in its proper sense. Vows exchanged without legal documents to seal them means

naught in our newly restored civilized realm.

I have found someone who would wed me properly, a man of noble birth and worthwhile character who will see me know the happiness I seek. I have gone to him in Belgaeran, and I have brought Aelwen with me. Do not lament our loss ... for you have none to thank or blame but yourself for it. If you had ever considered us part or parcel of your happiness, we might have remained.

"They told Aelwen I was dead," Aedhir told Pryce. "There was a letter waiting for me in Cuan'darach ... a letter from Aelwen. She said Iona had told her all of these years that I was dead, and that she had only discovered the truth of late, when she found all of the letters I had written. Iona had kept them from her, hidden."

Pryce did not say anything. He looked down at his brimague, cradling the glass between his palms and turning it slowly this way and that, his expression troubled.

"I lost my reason, Pryce," Aedhir said quietly, hanging his head and uttering a soft sigh. "I read that letter and something in me ... something that had been drawn taut for so long just snapped. I went to Ultan's home in the Rioga foothills outside of the city, and when he came to the door to receive me, he was so damned contemptuous. He looked at me, spoke to me as though I was something he had found smeared against his boot heel, something he would scrape off on the edge of a rock. I asked to see Iona and he told me she would not see me. I asked to see Aelwen; he said she would not see me, either. He made one too many pretentious remarks for my liking, and I cold-cocked him. Knocked his bloody, pompous ass to the floor of his foyer."

"They called the constable?" Pryce asked.

Aedhir flapped his hand dismissively. "Yes," he said. "I left before he arrived. The Good Mother only knows what preposterous story Ultan concocted against me."

"You might know, had you remained to offer your account of things," Pryce said.

Aedhir looked at him. "If I had been arrested, we would have been in Tiralainn until the spring," he said with a slight frown. "There would have been depositions to give, arraignments to be held, bond to be set and posted, official inquest before the county magistrate. These matters do not move swiftly and fade away. They take time ... time that would have cost us all wages and fares. You can tell the crew that, if you would like, Pryce. I would risk a warrant that they might all yet get paid through the winter."

"How did you get clearance from the Crown Navy to leave port early?" Pryce asked. This was another point Pryce had kept needling him about from the moment of their departure. Aedhir had shuffled and stumbled his way around the inquiries, as well as Pryce's repeated requests to review their written orders from the Crown.

"They would not have granted it to you with a warrant issued for your arrest," Pryce said. When Aedhir did not answer him, turning instead toward the stern windows once more, Pryce grew very still. His brows raised in tandem and he blinked at Aedhir. "How did you get clearance?" he asked again, softly.

"I have the ambassador of the Crown aboard, on official Crown business," Aedhir replied. "What other clearance do I need?"

"You said Lord Fabhcun was not the reason we left early," Pryce said. He set aside his glass and stood,

stricken. "Captain ... Aedhir, you ... you did receive clearance, did you not?"

"Not precisely," Aedhir said, not looking at Pryce.

"What?" Pryce said. "What do you mean, *not precisely*?"

"It is nothing, Pryce," Aedhir said. "Do not worry for it. I will take care of everything, see it all right when we get back to Tiralainn."

"It is nothing?" Pryce exclaimed, breathlessly. "Nothing? Aedhir ... if we do not have orders from the Crown, then we are sailing under illegal circumstance! We have stolen the ship!"

Aedhir laughed at this, shaking his head. "We have not stolen anything, Pryce."

"But we are not supposed to be here. This boat belongs to the Crown. We are like pirates, Aedhir!"

Aedhir arched his brow at this and smirked. "Hoah, I suppose we are."

"Are you mad?" Pryce cried.

"This boat may be titled to the Crown, but it is mine," Aedhir told him. "I have captained thea'*Maorga* for fifteen years ... I have bought and paid for her a thousand-fold with blood, tears, effort and energy. She is mine. Kierken will not trouble us for it. He is my friend, and I will speak to him. It will be fine."

"If he is your friend, why did you not speak to him before we left? Take care of matters then?"

"Because the King had just survived an assassination attempt, Pryce," Aedhir said. "A thwarted rebellion against his rule. I figured he had more important things to occupy his mind, given such circumstances."

He went to the younger man, laying his hand against Pryce's shoulder. "It will be alright," he said. "I will take care of it. Do you think I would do anything to see harm come to you? To any of the crew?"

"No," Pryce said quietly, shaking his head. He looked down at his shoes, obviously distressed.

Aedhir smiled at him gently, tucking his fingertips beneath Pryce's chin and drawing his gaze from the floor. "By my word, Pryce, it will be fine. Do not worry."

Pryce glanced at him, and then averted his eyes over Aedhir's shoulders, his brows pinched. "I am not worried for me," he said. "I am worried for you."

"I know, lad."

"What if Kierken will not help you? What if they put you in jail, or see you pilloried?"

"Then you must promise you will come and visit me," Aedhir told him, trying to coax a smile.

"That is not funny, Aedhir," Pryce told him, frowning.

Aedhir hooked his hand against the back of Pryce's neck and drew him against his shoulder, embracing him briefly, fondly. "It will be alright," he said again, turning his face and speaking against the young man's tousled hair. "I promise, Pryce."

Chapter Two

A man might not be able to change his measure, but an Elf keeps his word

Pryce was due to serve as the officer on deck from midnight until four in the new morrow. He knew he ought to retire to his room, stretch out on his cot for awhile and try to sleep, but as he left Aedhir's quarters, he found his mind not the least bit interested in falling still or quiet. He stood at the railing along the poop deck for a long time, looking out over the water, his brows drawn, his lips pressed together in a thin, troubled line. It was cold; he shivered even through the heavy wool of his great coat, and he tucked his hands into his pockets, watching his breath drift away from his mouth in a moonlit haze.

"Are you alright, Lieutenant Finamur?" asked a voice from behind him, startling him from his thoughts. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled to find Wenham Poel.

"I am fine, Wen," Pryce said. "Tending my own garden, that is all." He tapped his forefinger against his brow, and Wen smiled. "Have you been calling for me?"

"No, sir," Wen said. "I wanted to thank you, that is all, for showing me how to record the logbook earlier."

"You are quite welcome," Pryce said. "You are on the midnight watch? You can keep with me afterwards, if you want, and I will show you how to mark the traverse-board."

"I would appreciate that, sir," Wen said. "There is so much more to learn than I would have ever thought. Sometimes, it makes my head swim."

"It is not so hard once you grow accustomed to it," Pryce said. "You will see. It will all be like breathing to you someday. You will not find a better captain to teach you than Captain Fainne, that is for certain."

"He is the greatest sea captain in the whole Crown Navy," Wen said, his eyes round and bright with admiration. "That is what I have always heard."

"I have long thought so myself," Pryce said with a nod. He smiled. "I hope I might one day be even a faint measure of the officer he is."

"Hoah, me, too." Wen came to stand beside Pryce at the railing. "How long have you known him?"

Pryce crossed his forearms against the railing, leaning comfortably forward. He gazed out over the water again. "The Captain? My life through, practically, ever since I was a baby," he said. "I have sailed with him twelve years come this March."

"How do you know him so?" Wen asked. He positioned his arms on the rail and mimicked Pryce's posture.

Pryce shrugged. "He was a friend to my parents during the First War," he said. "They were all part of a rebel alliance called the Fiainas. I do not remember much; I was only three when the War ended, but I..." The corner of his mouth lifted fondly. "I remember the Captain, even then."

"That long ago?" Wen asked, raising his brow.

"Not much, really, but I remember," Pryce said. "He had a daughter my age, and he would play with us, carry us around on his shoulders, or chase us. My father was killed before the war ended, and then afterwards, when I was twelve, my mother got very sick. Captain Fainne was already to sea by then with his appointment from the King, but my mother sent word to him. She left me to his custody and care." He glanced at Wen. "I do not know how he got that message, but he did ... and he turned right around and sailed back for me. They had brought me to an orphanage after Mother..." His voice faded momentarily. "Well, the Captain found me there, anyway. I remember him in his splendid blue uniform, standing in the foyer, waiting for me."

Pryce reached inside the lapel of his coat, dipping his hand into an inner pocket. He produced a silver toitin case. "I am sorry," he said. "I am rambling. You do not want to hear my life's history."

"I do not mind, Lieutenant," Wen said, drawing Pryce's gaze as he slipped a toitin from the case and tucked it in his mouth.

"We are off the quarterdeck, Wen," he said with a smile. "You can call me Pryce, if you would like." He offered the opened toitin case to the younger man. "Do you smoke?"

"Yes, thank you ... Pryce," Wen replied, making Pryce smile all the more. They struck flints to their toitins and stood together, smoking and admiring the night.

"So what made you decide to become a Naval officer?" Pryce asked.

Wen smirked. "It was either that or be forced into marriage," he said. Pryce uttered a soft snort, and Wen laughed. "Hoah, tell me about it." He gazed out over the water, and his brows drew narrow, his mouth turning downward into a frown. "My mother had it all very neatly arranged for me ... my marriage, my life. How many children I would have, what their names would be."

"Was she pretty?" Pryce asked.

"Who?"

"The girl," Pryce said. "The one your mother arranged for you to marry. Was she pretty, at least?"

Wen laughed. "No, she was not pretty. She was rather bloated and plain, if you must know."

"Oh," Pryce said. "Well, I would say you made the better choice, then."

They laughed together. After a long moment of comfortable silence between them, Wen glanced at Pryce. "You really care about Captain Fainne, do you not?" he asked. "You are close to him, I mean."

Pryce nodded. "He is like a father to me. He has always taken care of me, looked out for me."

"You admire him."

Pryce nodded again. "Yes, I do," he said. "He is a good man. The finest I have ever known." *Even if he lands his bloody ass in prison*, he thought. He averted his eyes to the sea, and all at once, his eyes flew wide.

"Look, Wen," he whispered, reaching out and clapping his hand against the sleeve of Wen's justicoat, startling the breath from the younger man. Pryce pointed with his other hand, thrusting his toitin toward the water. "Look astern, do you see ... there, to the starboard?"

Wen followed his hand and jerked, gasping sharply. Out upon the water, in the frigate's moonlit wake, several dark, silhouettes broke through the water. The humped forms undulated through the waves, rising and falling; as some of them breached the surface of the sea, the moon's pale glow infused along the lengths of horns, like bowsprits thrusting forth toward the sky.

"What in the duchan...?" Wen whispered, backpedaling from the railing.

"They are nars," Pryce breathed, his mouth unfurling in a broad, enraptured smile. "It is a school of nars. They are whales, Wen ... they breathe air, like we do. They come to the surface to breathe. There must be a dozen of them ... do you see?"

"Will they attack the ship?"

Pryce blinked at him. For the first time, he noticed Wen looked stricken, clearly not sharing his fascination. "What? No, of course not. Sometimes they draw near, that is all. They are curious about us." He smiled, placing his hand against Wen's shoulder and drawing him toward the railing again. "It is alright, truly, I promise."

"What is that on their heads?" Wen asked, as he watched the creatures slip silently, gracefully among the waves.

"It is not from their heads as much as their mouths," Pryce said. "It is a tooth ... a tusk. Only the males have them. Nars migrate in the winter months southward from the Ionium Sea on the glacial currents. They go north once more in the spring. Are they not beautiful?"

"Yes," Wen whispered, nodding. "Yes, they are."

A low, resonant moan suddenly trembled in the air, a mournful, plaintive sound that carried across the cold air, the frigid water. Pryce turned to Wen, grinning and excited. "Do you hear that? They are singing!"

"They sing?"

"It is how they speak to one another," Pryce said. "Find each other."

"They sound so sad," Wen said, as another nar cry sounded in the night.

"I would be sad, too, if I had to swim in this water," Pryce remarked. He glanced at Wen, his brow raised, and Wen laughed.

* * * *

Two hours later, Wen stole into the small cabin he and Odhran shared. He eased the door open only wide enough to slip his narrow frame through, and then closed it silently behind him. The room was dark; Odhran had retired after supper to sleep before their midnight watch, and Wen crept forward, his footsteps tentative, his hands held warily before him as he shuffled toward his cot.

"You are going to ruin it," Odhran said from behind him, unseen in the darkness, and Wen whirled

about, his eyes flown wide in start.

"Hoah ... damn, Odhran, you nearly scared me witless!" he exclaimed. His legs struck his bunk and he reached down, patting his hands against his coverlets. "I am not going to ruin anything," he said as he shrugged his great coat and underlying justicoat from his shoulders, dropping them at the foot of the bed.

"We have two hours left before the watch ... plenty of time to sleep."

He heard the scraping strike of flints, the soft hiss of flames, and dim lamplight filled the chamber from behind him. He turned to find Odhran sitting up in his cot, regarding Wen darkly, his brows drawn in a slight furrow, the corners of his mouth turned in a frown. "That is not what I meant, Aelwen," he said.

Aelwen Fainne sat on the edge of her bunk ... Wenham Poel's bunk ... and tugged at the cravat arranged about her throat, tucked beneath the top of her waistcoat. "Then what do you mean, Odhran?"

"I mean you getting all fluttery over Lieutenant Finamur," Odhran said. "You are going to see us both caught. You are going to ruin it."

Aelwen laughed, her eyes flown wide. "I am not getting *fluttery* over him," she said.

"I have known you for fifteen years, Wen," Odhran said. "I think I should know when you are getting fluttery over someone."

"You are being daft. We saw a school of nars off the starboard stern ... whales, Odhran. Horned whales. They were absolutely astonishing. You should have seen it. And he showed me logbook protocol, worked with me on some knots ... overhand, diamond, wallknot. You know, you might benefit from such tutelage, too."

"Yes, if I planned a life as a sailor ... which I do not," Odhran said. "One round trip, that was it for me, remember? To Cneas and back again. No knot tying, no mess duty, no all-hands-on deck ... and no more bloody climbing up masts."

"I am sorry for that. How many times must I tell you?" Aelwen propped her ankle against her opposite knee and wrestled her shoe from her foot. She glanced at Odhran. "And why are you still so upset about it, anyway? You made it. You should be proud for it ... not sore at me."

Odhran's expression softened and he sighed heavily, forking his fingers through his hair. "I am not sore at you, Wen," he said. "It is just ... when you came to me with this idea, it seemed good at the time, right in my mind. But it is harder than I thought, and longer..." He looked at her, upset. "It was supposed to be six weeks, you told me. Three weeks to Cneas, then we turn 'round for three weeks back ... plenty of time with the autumn interim until classes resume. But now, your father is saying we are to spend three weeks in Cneas, Wen ... three weeks! I will never make up all of that lost classwork, and I will lose my scholarship for certain ... if they do not boot me from the history program altogether."

"They will not do that, Odhran," Aelwen told him. She stood and walked over to his cot, sitting next to him. "They could not do that."

"Of course they could," he said. "Maybe classes are not so important to you, but they are very much so to me. I worked hard to get in that program."

"They are important to me," she said, frowning. "I work hard, too. I am the one who must sneak to classes ... only take one or two per session, pay for them from my own pocket ... lest my mother finds

out. 'What need has a lady for education, if she has an affluent husband?' she is fond to say."

"My parents think I am in bloody Paldorahn for the interim," Odhran said. "What are they to think when the university writes them, asking where I am once the spring term is underway? They are going to kill me, I just know it. My mother is going to collapse upon the floor to learn I am missing. And my father ... hoah, Strachan is going to string me up from the Pionos gallows when he learns I forged his name to the midshipmen's registry."

"No, he will not," Aelwen told him as he hung his head, miserable. She pressed her hands against the apex of his shoulders and began to knead. "Your neck is so broad, you would snap the line ... and the gallow crossbeam if he tried."

Odhran snickered and then glanced at her frowning. "Do not make me laugh, Wen. This is not funny."

"Father told me in one of his letters that he thought every young man should have at least one sea-crossing beneath his belt to bolster both his back and character," she said. "And you have seen all of the officer-recruitment placards the King posts on campus. Plenty of young noble lords are entertaining such pursuits as this. Your father will be pleased and proud of you."

"Yes, after he is finished throttling me until my eyes bulge forth from their sockets," Odhran lamented.

"My mother will not even see me have that courtesy," Aelwen said. "She will likely disown me to learn of this. Oh, no, what am I thinking? She would keep me under her wing if only to spite my efforts."

"Or worse ... yet see you marry Malvo Hunwick."

Aelwen grimaced. "Send me home to your father's garrote, Odhran, please."

"You should have just married me," Odhran said, closing his eyes as she rubbed his aching neck. "I am of noble enough birth, and it would have been much easier than this. A lot less bother and work for us both."

"I am not half the lass good enough to marry you, Odhran Frankley," she said, leaning over and kissing him noisily on the cheek, making him laugh. "Though I should be so lucky. You would make a magnificent Naval officer."

He opened one eye. "Do you really think so?"

"Of course," she said. "Think of how pleased everyone will be when you return to Belgaeran, a dashing commissioned midshipman. You will have to wade through tossed corsets and garters to cross the streets."

He shook his head, chuckling quietly. "So when are you going to tell Captain Fainne who you are?" he asked.

She shrugged, looking down at her lap. "When we get to Cneas. I do not know if he received my letter at Cuan'darach, and even if he did, he has not seen me in seventeen years. It will be a shock to him, I am sure."

"A shock? You have been standing right in front of him for three weeks ... the spitting image of him, and going by the name *Wen*, no less," Odhran said.

She slapped him. "He has not seen me in seventeen years," she said again. "He has no idea what I look like. Besides, he thinks I am *Wenham*... a boy ... not *Ael wen*. I will tell him when I am ready, and he will not suspect in the meantime."

"He will if you do not stop fluttering around Lieutenant Finamur."

Aelwen laughed. "There you go again. I am not fluttering around Pryce."

"So it is just *Pryce* now?"

"He said we could call him that off the quarterdeck," she said. "*We*, Odhran, as in you and me ... the both of us."

"What bloody kind of name is *Pryce*?" Odhran asked. "That it something you haggle over at the a'Clos market square."

"Stop, now. He was named for his father, Rhys. It means *son of Rhys*."

"Oh, so you are discussing patrilineal heritages with him now, as well as logbooks, wellknots and horned whales."

"We were making conversation," she said, slapping him again and laughing. "He was being nice, Odhran ... a friend."

He glanced at her, still dubious. "You are going to ruin it," he said.

Aelwen hooked her arms around his neck and he smiled, despite himself. "No," she said, kissing his cheek again. "I am not."

* * * *

Rhyden had retired to his stateroom after supper. He had stretched out on his cot, his brother's book of poetic ramblings propped against his stomach, and he had drifted off to sleep without intending to. He dreamed of a woman, a woman he loved and had left behind in Belgaeran.

Her name was Qynh, and she was the Queen of Tiralainn, wife to his friend, his King. Rhyden had known her for twenty years; he had thought they exchanged letters for most of this time, fond and tender correspondences while living on opposite sides of the Muir Fuar sea. She had been a part of his life, his heart for so long, Rhyden no longer remembered how he had drawn breath without the thought of her. He loved Qynh as he had no other in all of his days, a love that shamed him deeply, because it was one he had no right to feel, much less ever hope to express or see fulfilled.

He dreamed that she came to him, kneeling over him in his bed, her thighs pressing lightly against his hips. Qynh smiled at him, her long, black hair cascading over her shoulders in glossy waves, the white linen of her dressing gown aglow with an infusion of dim lamplight.

"Qynh," he whispered, reaching for her. His fingertips brushed against her cheek, trailing into her hair and he took his face between his hands as she leaned toward him. His voice abandoned him in a helpless whimper as her mouth settled against his and he tangled his fingers in her hair. He raised his head, his shoulders from the pillow and drew her against him, kissing her deeply.

"I love you," he whispered, his lips brushing hers as he spoke. The delicate pressure of her body, the wondrous friction as she moved against him left him breathless. Her mouth trailed toward his cheek and he canted his head back, opening his eyes as she kissed his throat.

There was a falcon perched on the end of his bed, a small raptor with golden feathers. It ruffled its downy breast and shook itself into a comfortable position, its talons hooked about the iron frame of the bed. Startled, Rhyden gasped softly.

"Qynh," he breathed, taking her by the shoulders as her lips danced against the corner of his jaw. "Qynh, behind you ... look...!"

"The measure of a man lies in his heart," she breathed against his ear. "Not his deeds."

He awoke with a start, gasping as his eyes flew open, the imagined sensation of her hair lingering against his fingertips. He was alone, his book opened and lying on his chest, his lantern casting a narrow circumference of light around the stateroom. He sat up, blinking dazedly at the foot of his bed. The falcon was gone as well, the railing vacant, the chamber empty. He forked his fingers through the crown of his heavy hair, shoving it back from his face.

The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds.

These words had been the last utterance of Trejaeran Muirel, Qynh's brother, and the closest friend Rhyden had ever known. They had not made sense to Rhyden at the time, but in the fifteen years since Trejaeran's death, they had come to have profound and poignant meaning, pointed and painful significance in Rhyden's life.

The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds.

He had learned the humiliating truth of his love for Qynh only weeks ago while in Tiralainn; the letters that had bound his heart to hers for so long had not been written by the Queen at all. They had been penned by her handmaid, a seemingly innocent deception by a lonely young woman who had thought she had found in his correspondences a kindred spirit, a like mind and heart. He had learned the truth and it had devastated him.

Rhyden had thought this revelation ended things. In his mind, he had realized that his love for Qynh had always been a lie. The reality he had refused to see ... that Qynh was his Queen, married to another, pregnant with his King's heir ... came crashing brutally upon him, and he had thought by leaving, by putting all of it behind him and retreating into the familiar comfort of his isolated life in Cneas, he might escape his pain, confusion and betrayal.

And then she had come to him on his last morning in the royal city.

"She always read your letters to me. I always heard them, every word," Qynh had said, and Rhyden's humiliation, the realization of his heart's futile and foolish endearments had been complete. He had never admitted his love to Qynh aloud, only in the pages of his letters, and he had consoled himself with the thought that because Qynh had never received the notes, she had never realized his love. He had thought he had preserved at least this solitary scrap of dignity.

"It does not matter now," he had told her, aghast.

Qynh had come to him, and with four simple words, she had torn wide the wounds within his heart that

had only just barely begun to heal.

"I love you, Rhyden."

He had been unable to look at her. He had been packing for his trip, folding clothes and pressing them deep within his traveling trunk, and he had stared down at his stacked shirts and breeches. "In what way?" he had whispered.

She had cradled his face against her hand and kissed him, her lips fleeting and sweet against his. "In whatever way makes your heart feel safe," she had breathed. "And not alone."

Being alone was the only way Rhyden had ever known to feel safe, but for the first time in his life, solitude offered him no sanctuary. He had told Aedhir that he had once thought there was nothing for him in Tiralainn, and he realized now the fallacy in that statement. There was something for him in Tiralainn ... Qynh, the woman he loved ... and Rhyden was desperate, lonely for her.

The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds.

Here was Rhyden's measure, this pathetic admission, these fading dreams of her touch, her kiss, like the phantom fragrance of perfume caught in tapestry. He did not know what the falcon had meant. He had dreamed of the bird frequently over the last weeks, seeing it within his mind without understanding why. He knew why he had dreamt of Qynh, though. All too well did he realize his mind's intention with such a cruel illusion.

His deeds in life had marked him a hero but the weakness of his heart had marked him as anything but. He yearned for a woman he could never have; he dreamed of her with emotions that left him trembling with both desire and shame. He had left Tiralainn with the hope that he might free himself of her, but now, with Aedhir's offer still fresh in his mind

I know you have your duties and all, and you have been already gone from them awhile ... six weeks might be enough to get affairs together, see someone in your stead until Kierken finds another ambassador, do you not think?

If you should decide to return...

all Rhyden wanted to do was turn the ship around and sail west once more, back to Tiralainn and to Qynh.

And what will you do when you get there? he asked himself. He stood and went to his washstand, placing his hands on either side of the basin and leaning towards his reflection in the small, oval mirror. *What will you do, Rhyden? Go to her, declare your love for her and beg her away from Kierken ... your King, whom you profess to serve loyally? Whom you call your friend?*

His heart was selfish and torn, and therein lay his measure. He looked into the glass, at the image of his face, the refined lines and deliberate angles of his countenance. He gazed into his own dark eyes, studied the stern lines of his brows. He looked at the shadows cast along his high cheekbones, his strong jaw and tapered chin, the length of his slender nose, the curved, austere measure of his mouth. It was a visage most familiar to him; one he had grown to despise.

What would you see come of it, Rhyden? he asked the young Elf in the mirror. *Would you have Qynh leave Kierken? Would you truly betray your King so? Would you truly hurt your friend that way?*

He pressed his hand against the mirror, splaying his fingers wide, obscuring much of his reflection. He looked at the image before him, the face hidden from view. It could have been anyone's beneath his fingertips, any visage at all. He wished that he could draw his palm from the glass and find such a stranger in his place, someone different instead of the weak and selfish person he had become.

* * * *

Rhyden had made a promise before leaving Tiralainn, a promise he meant to keep that night. He had offered his word to a man named Kaevir Macleod, someone he knew neither fondly nor well, but to whom Rhyden was obligated by his oath nonetheless. This effort did not make him noble; like anything else in his days, it was an honorable front, a guise to mask the failings within him. Elves could not lie by their very natures and when Rhyden had given his promise to Kaevir, he was bound by his word.

He knelt on the floor by his bunk and reached beneath the slim mattress and bed frame, his fingers groping until they brushed against the edge of a metal box. He pulled the box out and stared at it, watching the lamplight play against its dull, grey surface.

Kaevir had possessed an ancient talisman. He had denounced the powers the talisman had given to him ... command over the winds that he had not wanted, had abandoned freely ... and he had entrusted it to Rhyden. The talisman, a small, seemingly unobtrusive orb of black stone lay locked within the confines of the iron box and Kaevir had begged Rhyden to cast it into the sea.

A man might not be able to change his measure, but an Elf keeps his word. Rhyden stood, lifting the heavy box in his arms and setting it on his bed. He drew his justicoat over his shoulders, pulling his heavily lined woolen great coat over this. He caught his long sheaf of blond hair against the backs of his hands and eased it out from beneath his collar. The nights grew very cold out on the deck, and the wind cut through even thick layers of clothing with chilling ease. He reached into his coat pockets and found his gloves, lambskin and lined with wool. He pulled them on and then hefted the cumbersome crate again.

As he turned to leave, he caught sight of his reflection in the washstand mirror and he paused.

A man's measure lies in his heart, not his deeds, Qynh's voice whispered in his mind, and he lowered his face, averting his eyes from the glass.

He carried the box with him as he made his way along the narrow corridor flanking the officers' staterooms and the bulwark of the ship. All was quiet, and he paused in the hallway, balancing the crate between his arm and hip as he reached into the fob pocket of his breeches and withdrew his watch. He flipped back the gold lid and angled the watch until lamplight from over his shoulder caught in the filigreed hands, winking softly. It was after one o'clock in the morning. The middle watch would be topside, and everyone else asleep in the berth deck or staterooms.

Rhyden tucked his watch in his pocket once more and mounted the ladder leading up onto the main deck. A bitter wind slapped him as he stepped out onto the deck, fluttering his hair into his face and stealing his breath from him in a startled, whooping gasp. His Elfin ears, larger and far more sensitive than a man's, tapered into distinctive points at the tips, caught the sounds of faint conversations and muted laughter above the gust. The night watch, about thirty men, worked the ship by moonlight while their fellows took their turns in their cots. Aedhir employed a crew of nearly one hundred; during times of war, the frigate would have boasted half again as many men aboard her. There was no such thing as a quiet moment with so many engaged in so many activities and conversations, but Rhyden did not attract attention to himself from the sailors on deck, or high aloft tending to the rigging as he crossed the spar deck.

He stood poised at the port-side railing for a long moment, cradling the metal box in his hands. He listened to the music of the ship, her wooden hull creaking and groaning in gentle, soothing fashion beneath him, her furled sails creaking in their lines, the topsails and mains fluttering softly in the breeze. He could hear the sea, the hushed roar of the surface as the prow sliced a path against it, the whispering of waves rising and falling, like the measure of the ocean's breath. He could smell the water, a sharp and bittersweet fragrance; if he leaned over far enough, spray from the bow peppered his cheeks and lips, and he could taste the salt of the sea against his tongue. For the first time in the entire voyage, the night sky was not pristine and flawless, speckled with the pinpoints of ten-thousand stars. There were clouds overhead, thick lines of slate grey luminous with the moon's glow as they crept from one corner of the horizon to the other.

Rhyden hefted the crate and leaned out over the railing, gazing down at the black water below. "Here is your measure, Kaevir," he murmured, because Kaevir had given his talisman and all of its power away in a pure and selfless act, a noble offering Rhyden doubted he could have made had their positions been reversed. He opened his arms and watched the box drop away from him. It fell against the sea; there was a loud, heavy splash, a lick of foam and then the crate was gone, naught but ripples fading on the water's surface.

"Hoah, now ... what are you doing?" a voice barked sharply near his ear. A strong hand fell firmly against his sleeve, thick fingers pressing forcefully against his arm, jerking at him.

Rhyden whirled about reflexively, startled. He hooked his arm up as he moved, dislodging the offending hand from his coat. "Do not touch me," he said, his brows drawing together as he frowned at the sailor who stood behind him. The man's name was unknown, but his face was somewhat familiar; he was fond to glower at Rhyden at any given opportunity, to mutter among his crewmates whenever Rhyden would pass.

"What were you doing there? What did you just drop off the ship?" the man asked, reaching for Rhyden again, his face set in a disagreeable and suspicious scowl. Six other sailors, all of them burly and well-muscled, climbed down from nearby shrouds or crossed the deck towards them, alarmed by the sharp note in their friend's voice.

Rhyden shrugged away from the man's grasp again, his frown deepening. "I said do not touch me."

"What is the matter, Nimon?" one of the others asked. Rhyden recognized him as well, but he could match a name with this one's countenance. He was Sulien Magill, called Suli by most aboard. He was Aedhir's boatswain, the highest ranking non-commissioned officer on staff, and the man who kept the *a'Maorga* afloat and rigged. His words were directed at his crewman, Nimon, but his eyes, glinting beneath his furrowed brows, were fixed upon Rhyden.

"The Elf just threw something overboard, Mister Suli," said Nimon. "I saw him leaning over the railing and thought he meant to jump. I came up to him and saw something big and heavy dropping from his hands. I pulled him backwards, and he moved like he meant to swing at me or something."

"What did you throw?" Suli asked Rhyden. "You cannot just dump things overboard as you damn pretty please. You could hit the hull, damage it."

"Maybe he meant to damage the hull," one of the other sailors said, frowning.

"Maybe it was something ... some sort of rotten Elf magic," said another. "Nimon said Elves know all

sorts of magic and tricks, that he would be bad luck for us all."

"Did it hit the hull?" Suli asked Nimon.

"Hard to say, though I heard a thump," Nimon replied. He cut his eyes toward Rhyden, glowering. "It might well have."

"There was no thump," Rhyden said. "It hit the water, not the hull."

"What was it that you threw?" Suli asked as Nimon whirled upon Rhyden, his eyes flashing hotly, his hands curling into fists.

"Are you calling me a liar, Elf?" he demanded, his voice overlapping the boatswain's.

Rhyden met Nimon's gaze evenly. "You said you heard a thump, and there was none to be heard, sir. I would let you draw whatever inference from that you would like."

"Bloody rot Gaelge bastard..." Nimon seethed, springing forward, his fists bared. Suli caught him roughly by the shoulders and jerked him backwards.

"Avast, Nimon ... stand down, I say," Suli snapped, giving Nimon a rough little shake, as one might a naughty terrier. He glared at Rhyden. "I asked you what you threw."

Rhyden said nothing. He was not about to answer to the ridiculous charges and questions they were offering. It would have done him no good to waste the breath; it was plain the men had no intention of believing him. They had been waiting for a moment like this, the chance to confirm their own misgivings and prejudices against him, and they meant to have it in full. He would wait, let them have their moment, because they would obviously not let him brush past them and leave. Aedhir would come and set matters right ... or at least tolerable until they arrived to port in Cneas.

"What did you toss overboard, Lord Fabhcun?" Suli asked again. "Kindly do not see me call the master-at-arms and have you taken to the hold, sir, until you tell me."

"No, take him to the hold, Suli," one of the hands said loudly, boldly. "Damn, rotted Elf ... the Good Mother only knows what he is up to, but it can be nothing good, by my breath!"

"He tried to sabotage the ship, that is for certain," Nimon said. "I heard a thump, I tell you, clear as a bell on a still morrow. He threw something against the side of the ship. And how long has he been out here, anyway? I only just now saw him leaning over the railing. What if he was climbing around in the rigging somewhere, messing with the sails or lines?"

"Were you up in the shrouds, Lord Fabhcun?" Suli asked, scowling again as this ominous consideration occurred to him.

Rhyden frowned at him, angry. The incident had gone from simply insulting to downright incendiary. "Of course not," he said. "Mister Magill, surely you can see that..."

"What is going on here, Suli?" came a loud voice, and Rhyden turned to find First Officer Pryce Finamur striding briskly toward them from the quarterdeck, flanked by the midshipmen, Wen and Odhran. Pryce looked between Rhyden and the gathering of crewmen as he approached, his brows narrowed.

"One of my hands ... Nimon, here, sir ... came upon Lord Fabhcun throwing something overboard, Lieutenant Finamur," Suli said, nodding his chin once in polite deference to the young officer. "I was just trying to ascertain what it might have been, sir."

"It was large and heavy, something made out of metal," Nimon said. "I heard it hit the side of the hull, Lieutenant ... a loud thump. It might have cracked a plank somewhere."

Pryce looked at Nimon for a long moment. "Mister Hodder, is it not?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Nimon said. "I saw the Elf leaning over the railing, and I came because I thought he meant to..."

"Mister Hodder, when I would like your thoughts or observations on any given matter, I will ask them of you," Pryce told him mildly, holding Nimon's gaze fast. Nimon sputtered, his eyes widening in sudden, bright ire, but he wisely bit his tongue against any retort he might have offered the lieutenant. Pryce turned to Rhyden. "My Lord Fabhcun," he said, pressing his fingertips against the lapel of his great coat and lowering his face briefly, politely. "Did you throw something overboard, sir?"

"Yes, I did," Rhyden said.

"May I ask what that was, please, sir?"

"It was a metal box," Rhyden said. He indicated the crate's size with his hands. "It contained some personal items belonging to a friend of mine from Tiralainn. He had asked before I left if I would cast them into the sea, for sentimental reasons he did not offer and I did not ask of him."

"Thank you, Lord Fabchun," Pryce said, and he hooked his brow at the boatswain. "That seems a suitable enough reply to me, Suli."

"Should we check the lower decks, sir?" Suli asked him. "See if there are any signs of damage or leaks?"

Pryce glanced at Rhyden. "Did this box of yours strike the ship, Lord Fabhcun?"

"No, it did not," Rhyden replied.

Pryce nodded his head. "I do not think any such action is necessary, Suli," he said. "But thank you for your vigilance."

"What?" Nimon exclaimed. "It hit the hull ... I bloody well heard it! Let us bring Captain Fainne on deck, and let him rule on the matter. We could be drawing water, or it could be something else ... Elf magic, like Meirus said, something that will come back later upon us and..."

"Mister Hodder," Pryce said, drawing Nimon's voice to a startled halt with naught save his stern expression, his furrowed brows. "When Captain Fainne is below, the officer on deck addresses such matters. In this instance, that would be me."

"But, Lieutenant, I heard..." Nimon began.

"Speak once more, and I will see you docked a day's wages and given five lashes for insubordination," Pryce told him. Nimon fell abruptly and obligingly silent, but he glared at the younger man, his outrage

apparent on his face. Pryce turned to Suli. "See them all to their posts, and that we have no more trouble from the lot of them tonight."

"Aye, sir," Suli said, nodding, looking abashed and uncomfortable.

As the group of sailors broke apart, returning to their duties, Pryce looked at Rhyden, his expression not softening in the slightest. "Lord Fabhcun, I ask that the next time you would like to toss something overboard, you first obtain permission from the duty officer, to avoid any damage to the ship."

"Yes, Lieutenant, of course," Rhyden said, lowering his gaze respectfully. He brought his fingertips to his thumb and tapped his forehead and chin, an Elfin gesture of apology. "*Gabh mo leithsceal ... forgive me. I meant no harm.*"

"Odhran, kindly escort Lord Fabhcun to his stateroom," Pryce said. To Rhyden, he added: "I think it would be prudent for all involved if you stayed below for the remainder of the night, sir."

"Yes," Rhyden said, nodding. "You are probably right."

Chapter Three

A STORM AT SEA

"What is this I hear about you trying to sabotage my ship?" Aedhir asked with a wry smirk as he poked his head into Rhyden's stateroom.

Aedhir was amused, not angry to judge by his expression, but Rhyden felt abashed nonetheless. He sat on his bunk facing the door, with his shoulders against the bulkhead, a book propped open against his thighs. He tucked his finger between the pages to mark his place as he closed the volume. "I am sorry, Aedhir," he said. "I was not thinking. It was a foolish mistake; my mind was a thousand leagues hence. I should have known better ... thought to..."

"I am not worried about it," Aedhir told him, stepping into the room. "And you should not be, either."

The rough weather heralded earlier by encroaching clouds had found the frigate. It was nearly four in the morning, and for the better portion of the last hour, the *Maorga* had rolled and swayed beneath Rhyden. The normal murmurings of her joists and joints had turned into distinctive groans of protest and he could hear the shuddering thumps of rushing waves slapping against the hull, the wind whistling shrilly, gusting and buffeting against the bulwarks.

"Nimon Hodder is a trouble-monger," Aedhir said. "He is new to the crew ... not even Navy. I hired him away from a merchant vessel at Cuan'darach. Some of my men from the westrealm could not return at the short notice I had given them and I had fairly slim picking of who took their place."

Rhyden glanced down at his book. "Short notice," he said quietly. "Did you leave early because of me, Aedhir?"

"No, I did not," Aedhir said. "I am sorry for what happened, Rhyden. It was not your fault. You are my friend, and you are welcome aboard my frigate."

"Your crew does not seem to agree."

"My crew is made of men who do not know enough to forgive and forget ill will and ancient histories," Aedhir replied. He sat down on the cot and glanced over his shoulder toward Rhyden. "Time was once, I felt much the same as they do about Elves," he admitted with a weary sigh.

Rhyden nodded. Tirialainn was the native land of Elves, but now the number of full-blooded Gaeilge and Mianach had dwindled in comparison to the number of menfolk who called the realm home. Even more still were of mixed heritages, with races of men and Elves mingling, marrying and mating. Elves and men had not always lived in such harmony, however; almost fifty years earlier, they had arrived at this peace following a lengthy, bloody war ... the Cogadh'Dearg. Sometimes the resentments that had prompted the war yet remained, and Nimon was unfortunately not the first man Rhyden had ever encountered who had regarded him darkly just because he was an Elf.

"I do not feel that way now," Aedhir said, drawing Rhyden's gaze. "I cannot change the way others think, but I can change the way they act, at least while they are aboard my ship. No one else will treat you with that kind of discourtesy again, Rhyden. I will see to that. I docked Hodder a full day's wages..."

"I wish you had not done that," Rhyden said.

"He deserved it," Aedhir said. "He was disrespectful to you and insubordinate to his duty officer. And I needed to make an example of him, show the others of like mind that I will not abide by that kind of behavior."

Rhyden did not say anything, pressing his lips together in a thin, troubled line.

"Wen and Odhran were rather disappointed you did not thrash Hodder," Aedhir said, and Rhyden blinked at him. "They lived in Belgaeran ... they know your repute."

Rhyden could not help but to smile. "I did not think it would be especially prudent, given the circumstances."

"Likely not," Aedhir agreed, dropping him a wink. "But it would have made a damn fine show." He stood, tugging against his great coat lapels, settling it comfortably into place. "I need to go topside," he said. "There is a storm blowing in from the south. Have you ever been in a storm at sea before, Rhyden?"

"It has been many years ago," Rhyden said.

"It can be quite a ride," Aedhir said, the corner of his mouth hooking slightly. "We hit them sometimes sailing to Torach this time of the year. It will blow us hard but fast as it moves north. Stay below, if you would."

Rhyden nodded. "I will," he said.

"Do not worry," Aedhir told him. "All is well. Get some sleep, if you are able."

* * * *

Aedhir had mustered confidence in his voice about the storm as he had spoken to Rhyden, but as he climbed the ladder from the berth deck topside, he frowned. Harsh winds shuddered against the frigate, and the rough sea churned about the keel as though stirred by frenzied fingertips. A stinging, driving rain pelted the deck and he tucked his chin toward his chest, his brows drawn, his shoulders hunched as he

strode across the spar deck.

"Call all hands," he said to Suli, as he found the boatswain among the scurrying, hustling crew, calling orders upwards into the rigging, the peal of his whistle shrill above the wailing wind.

"Lieutenant Finamur has already given that call, sir," Suli said, shouting to be heard. Rain beaded in his beard and brows, streaming down from his hairline in rivulets.

Aedhir blinked at this, caught off-guard. "Furl the topsails and set the mains to lie to," he said, turning his face toward the ratlines above, squinting against the downpour as he watched men scrambling about on the shrouds and lines.

"Lieutenant Finamur has already given that call, as well, Captain," Suli told him.

Aedhir shook his head, managing a slight smile. "Well, then, it seems Lieutenant Finamur has it well in hand. Perhaps I should retire below for a spot of tea...?"

"He said you were called, sir."

"I was," Aedhir said, turning and frowning once more as he walked toward the quarterdeck. From behind him, Suli turned his face skyward once more and resumed whistling directions.

"Mister Pickens, how do we fare?" Aedhir called out to his helmsman as he approached. Pryce stood at the helmsman's shoulder, the collar of his great coat drawn towards his ears, his hair soaked and sodden, clinging to his forehead and cheeks. He regarded Aedhir from beneath drawn and furrowed brows; Aedhir had paused longer than he had meant to in conversation with Rhyden, and Pryce was obviously angry at him for his delay.

"We are holding north-northeast in a near gale, sir," Eisab Pickens shouted back, leaning forward to peer at the binnacle and consult the compasses.

"Strong gale gusts, Captain," Pryce said. "We are waiting for your word to bring her into the wind, Captain, to heave to."

"Really? That is quite courteous of you, Lieutenant Finamur. Heave to, Mister Pickens," Aedhir said, nodding his chin once at the helmsman. "Suli is setting your sails for you."

"Aye, Captain," said Pickens.

"Captain, that main topmast is not going to bear this wind for long," Pryce said. Aedhir knew Pryce well enough to glean the hidden inference in his words: *But it would if you had bloody well replaced it in Tiralainn.*

"You called the topsails furled, Lieutenant," Aedhir reminded him pointedly. "It will hold. Steady on, Mister Pickens ... watch your eyes, damn you. Lieutenant Finamur, a word with you aside."

Pryce had pretended to avert his gaze from Aedhir toward the binnacle and the two young midshipmen flanking him. Odhran looked both stricken by the storm, and decidedly unwell; his eyes were round and enormous, his pallor dimmed from its usual, ruddy hue to an ashen, waxy cast. Wen was soaked and shivering, but seemingly undisturbed, his eyes fixed with great interest on both the Captain and Pryce, as though the storm was nothing more than something the officers had concocted as a tutelage.

Aedhir lay his hand against Pryce's sleeve and drew him towards the mizzen mast. The two stood nearly shoulder to shoulder, hunkered together against the wind and rain. "You do not issue orders to call all hands or furl the sails, Pryce," Aedhir told him in a low voice, his brows drawn. "That is the Captain's call. You should have sent straight away for me."

"I did send for you, sir," Pryce said. "I sent Odhran as soon as the first winds stirred above strong. He reported that you meant to follow him ... you had to stop along the way and bid Lord Fabhcun keep below." He raised his brow at Aedhir. "What would you have of me? We had near gales almost at once ... that topmast cannot take that sort of wind. Already, our stern is wanting to blow west. If we broach with a full sail on that topmain, she will snap like kindling."

"I would have you hold this deck until my arrival, Lieutenant," Aedhir said. "That is your duty. You do not offer orders in my stead."

Pryce blinked at him, hurt by his rebuke, and Aedhir's stern expression softened. The young man had meant only what was best for the ship and crew, acting as he had only out of many experienced years of seeing Aedhir follow similar actions, and Aedhir knew it. In truth, he did not mind that Pryce had issued the orders to see the top sails furled, the mains set; Pryce had been right ... it had needed to be done, and Aedhir had not been there to see it ordered.

He was angry with himself, irked that the last weeks at sea had seen his mind turned more toward the letter from Aelwen and the subsequent troubles awaiting his return in Tiralainn than the working of his own ship. He had suspected the storm's approach since earlier in the day; he had been able to sense it in the quickening wind, the movement of clouds, even the water beneath them had yielded hints and warnings. Aedhir had not paid them the mind he should have, particularly with the topmast rigged and weakened as it was. He was angry for his own carelessness, because he knew all too well that inattentive captains made for dead crews.

"Pryce," he said, suddenly shamed by his harsh tone and sharp words. "I ... I did not mean..." He reached for the younger man, but Pryce turned his away.

"My apologies, Captain, for my insolence," he said. "I shall mind well my duties in the future, sir, and see it not happen again." He backed away from Aedhir, his shoulders stiffening into polite, aloof posture. "If I may be excused, I will see the midshipmen below, as you have the deck, sir."

"Pryce..." Aedhir said again, the frigid whip snatching the soft utterance from his lips.

"If I may be excused, Captain?" Pryce said again.

Aedhir turned back to the helm, showing his hands into his pockets, feeling the rain pelt against the crown of his head as he lowered his eyes toward the deck. "You are excused, Lieutenant."

* * * *

Rhyden blinked as a spatter of blood plopped against the page beneath his face, a solitary, scarlet droplet staining the parchment in a small circumference, glistening in the lamplight.

"What the duchan...?" he murmured as another drop hit the page, and then another. He brought his hand to his nose and his fingertips came away spotted with blood.

Elves had once possessed a remarkable gift, a blessing known in the legends and lore of their ancient

race as the sight. Through the sight, Elves had held great powers of prophecy; skilled Elfin seers had even been able to hold counsel with the spirits of the dead. Elves had been able to establish strong empathic bonds between themselves, and with other cognizant beings in their environments, such as animals or trees. Some had even once communicated with their minds; their thoughts expressed as freely as any spoken utterance.

In Rhyden's lifetime, the gift of the sight had passed from the Elves. It had been taken from them, stripped by the greatest seer who had ever lived ... his friend, Trejaeran Muirel. At the end of the Second Shadow War, Trejaeran had used his own indomitable sight to take the gift from the minds of every Elf in the realm. This had been one of the last acts of a young man desperate to keep his people safe from a terrible evil, an evil that would have reached them, hurt them only through abilities granted them from the sight. The effort had nearly killed Trejaeran; it left him weak and susceptible to the very evil from which he had sought to save others. To protect himself ... to protect them all ... Trejaeran had done the only thing he could to keep the darkness from him. He had killed himself.

The sight was gone; it had been fifteen years since Trejaeran had taken it from the Elves. Sometimes though, despite this, Rhyden thought he sometimes felt inklings of it stirring, a warm and familiar sensation within his mind he recognized dimly from his youth. It was usually no more than this, or occasions of simple fortuitous intuition, but sometimes, he would dream of things, or see fleeting images, like shadows moving out of the corner of his gaze, and he would wonder.

He had gone to Tiralainn because of a dream. He had dreamed Qynh came to him, warning him of danger; he had arrived in his homeland just in time to protect his King and Queen for the very threats he had foreseen in his mind. One week ago, on the afternoon he had stood on the deck with Aedhir and explained that his name, *Fabhcun*, meant *falcon* in the Gaeilgen tongue of the Elves, he had seen another vision, this one coming to him when he was wide-awake and in mid-sentence.

He had been dreaming of golden falcons lately, and all at once, he had seen one on the railing before him. It appeared out of nowhere, an apparition that had startled the breath from him. He had seen the bird, and then he had felt compelled to turn around, as though someone had tapped him on the back to garner his attention. He had looked over his shoulder and spied a young boy standing nearby, cloaked in the shadows of the sails against the floor of the deck. He had caught a glimpse of the boy's peculiar clothing, a long, flowing, fur-lined coat belted about his narrow hips with a broad sash of fabric; unusual, heavy boots with toes that tapered into upturned points and a cap fashioned of fur, with a broad cuff pulled low over his brow and ears. The child's physical features had been foreign to Rhyden; his eyes in particular, large and wide-set, gracefully shaped like almonds. His face had seemed very delicate with soft, shadowed curves. When Rhyden had stepped toward him, meaning to speak, the boy had dissipated into the air, like wayward smoke caught on a breeze.

He had turned around again, bewildered and alarmed, only to discover the falcon was gone as well. Aedhir had seen nothing, and Rhyden's peculiar behavior, his disconcerted reaction to nothing that had seemed amiss had troubled the Captain.

Rhyden's nose had begun to bleed within moments of the boy's disappearance. He had felt blood sliding in his nasal passages and had jerked his hands to his face in startled alarm, catching a sudden, heavy burst of blood against his fingers. The crew had seemed anxious by the incident, by the blood on the deck. That night alone in his stateroom, Rhyden had realized grimly that Nimon Hodder had likely convinced them it was some sort of Elfin magic ritual, a curse or something he had placed upon the ship.

He felt a sudden, warm rush and Rhyden drew in a sharp breath, his hands darting toward his nose just in time for blood to spurt against his palms. "Hoah...!" he gasped, pinching the bridge of his nose and

stumbling to his feet. His book fell from his lap to the floor with a sharp report and he staggered to his washbasin. He struggled to wrench his cravat loose from his neck; he shoved the wadded linen against his nose to catch the sudden torrent.

He glanced up into the mirror, holding the cloth firmly to his face, and a sudden, brilliant burst of white light reflected in the glass blinded him. A bright, searing pain lanced through his head, and Rhyden cried out, recoiling from the washstand. His hand slapped against the mirror, knocking it backwards into the wall as he stumbled. He tripped over his own feet, his eyes clamped shut, and he fell, smacking his shoulders painfully against the wall. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and he gasped for breath, shuddering on the floor. He could still see the light; it danced in the darkness behind his closed eyes in a corona of dazzling, swirling colors. He could still feel it; a terrible, aching throb wrapping around the cap of his skull towards his temples, his brows.

"What ... what was that...?" he whispered, breathless and panicked. His nose was still gushing blood, and it flowed down his throat now, threatening to gag him. He winced at the bitter taste of it in his mouth and he spat against the cravat.

He forced himself to open his eyes, willing his eyelids to pry back a halting, reluctant measure. Rhyden screamed again, crumpling forward as he saw nothing before him but that blazing, agonizing light. He dropped the cravat and tangled his bloodied fingers in his hair, shoving his palms against his temples as pain tore through his head once more.

All at once, within his mind, he could see Aedhir and Pryce standing together on the deck of the ship, next to one another in a downpour, with wind whipping their soaked hair into their faces and flapping the upturned collars of their coats.

"I would have you hold this deck until my arrival, Lieutenant," Aedhir said. "That is your duty. You do not offer orders in my stead."

"Stop it," Rhyden whispered. "Oh ... oh, Sweet Mother, stop it ... stop..."

"Pryce," Aedhir said, his expression softening with sudden realization and remorse at his sharp tone. "I ... I did not mean..."

"My apologies, Captain, for my insolence," Pryce said, ducking his head away from Aedhir's hand. "I shall mind well my duties in the future, sir, and see it not happen again. If I may be excused, I will see the midshipmen below, as you have the deck, sir."

Beyond their shoulders, behind them on the quarterdeck, Rhyden could see the binnacle and wheel of the helm. There was a sailor on duty at the wheel, a helmsman who clutched it fiercely between his hands to steer the ship against the plowing waves, the whipping winds, and sitting atop the wheel, its talons hooked deep enough into the wood to gouge trenches in the varnish, was a golden falcon.

"What is happening?" Rhyden gasped, pressing his palms tighter against his head. He gritted his teeth as another spasm of pain ripped through his mind. "What is happening to me?" he cried out, hoarse and frightened.

As he spoke, Rhyden saw another image in his mind; Pryce striding across the spar deck, his brows drawn angrily, the midshipmen, Wen and Odhran hurrying to match his brisk pace. The wind was blowing furiously, snapping their coat tails out in nearly parallel planes to the deck of the ship, and they stumbled on the rolling, pitching deck floors, their footsteps skittering against the wet planks.

He saw the falcon hook its wings and splay its talons, releasing its grip upon the wheel as it let the wind catch its light form and bear it skyward. He heard its voice, its high, shrill cry, and at the sound, more pain seized his head, forcing another anguished cry from him.

In his mind, he heard a terrible grinding sound, the heavy groan of taxed wood yielding to a massive strain. He saw Pryce upon the spar deck again; the young lieutenant's eyes shot skyward and flew wide in sudden alarm.

"The mast..." Pryce breathed.

Rhyden heard the splintering of the top main mast as the upper half yielded to the strain of the mainsail below, twisting in the violent wind against its vulnerable, mended shaft. He heard the loud, resounding snaps of standing rigging shifting and collapsing, of ratlines and shrouds wrenched asunder from their moorings and sent flailing and flapping in thick, heavy lengths and coils toward the deck. There was a loud, plaintive moan, like the mourning keens of whales, and the topmast toppled, collapsing down toward the deck.

Rhyden hooked his fingers in his hair and wailed, pressing his forehead against the floor, doubled over in pain. "Stop it!" he screamed. "For the love of the Good Mother, stop it!"

"Rhyden," a quiet voice said, and he felt something against the crown of his head, a gentle hand touching him. At this, the pain left him suddenly and in full. At the sound of the voice, Rhyden's eyes flew wide because he recognized it ... it had been fifteen years since he had last heard it, but he knew it yet, well and fondly. He looked up, his breath and voice tangled with shock in his throat.

"*Bidein* ... ?" he whispered, stunned and confused.

Trejaeran Muirel somehow knelt before him. He gazed at Rhyden, his large, blue eyes kind, the corners of his mouth lifted in a soft smile. *Bidein* had been Rhyden's nickname for Trejaeran; Trejaeran had been shorter than Rhyden in childhood, smaller in frame, and *bidein* was Gaeilgen for *little bit*. When he had died at the age of twenty-one, Trejaeran had come into his own physically, and had stood nearly as tall as Rhyden, lean but muscled and strong through his shoulders and limbs.

"*Beannacht*, Rhyden," Trejaeran said in greeting.

Rhyden's eyes flooded with disbelieving tears and he jerked away from Trejaeran's hand, scuttling back until his shoulders and spine smacked against the wall. He stared at Trejaeran, pale and stricken, mute with shock and fright. "You..." he said, shaking his head, shoving with his heels, pressing himself firmly against the wall. "You ... you cannot..."

"Rhyden," Trejaeran said, smiling at him, his dark hair draped across his forehead in tousled waves. He reached for Rhyden again. "It is alright."

"N-no...!" Rhyden gasped, shying against the wall, drawing his shoulder toward his cheek to ward off Trejaeran's hand. "I ... I have gone mad," he whispered. "Mathair Maith, surely I have gone mad...!"

"No, Rhyden," Trejaeran said, shaking his head. "Your mind has not broken. It is awakening."

* * * *

"One round trip," Odhran muttered, his hands shoved deeply into the pockets of his great coat, his broad

shoulders hunched as he shivered miserably. "That was it for me. To Cneas and back again. No knot tying, no mess duty, no all-hands-on-deck, no climbing up masts ... and no bloody storms at sea. One round trip."

"It will be alright," Aelwen whispered to him, her voice barely audible over the roar of the surging waves, the howling wind. She watched Pryce walk away from them toward her father, her mouth turned in a slight, troubled frown; Aedhir had just motioned to the lieutenant, hooking his forefinger in a gesture of beckon.

"Lieutenant Finamur, a word with you aside," he had said, his brows drawn in a disapproving furrow. Pryce had ignored naval protocol by not waiting for Aedhir to arrive on deck; he had issued orders to the boatswain to call the entire crew topside and trim the sails, and Aedhir was visibly angry with him for it.

"It will be alright?" Odhran repeated, blinking at her as if she had been struck daft.

"Father knows what he is doing," she said. "He is the finest captain in the entire Navy. He knows the workings of this ship like the back of his hand. He is not frightened by a storm."

"Well, I sure am," Odhran said. "What if we capsize? What if we are all lost at sea? Do you know what my parents will do to me?"

Aelwen watched an exchange of apparently sharp words between Aedhir and Pryce. When Aedhir's expression softened, and he reached for Pryce, the younger man recoiled from the captain.

"He scolded Pryce," she said.

"As he bloody well should have," Odhran replied. "I told him Captain Fainne was coming. He had no business ordering about the crew."

"And what would you have done, Odhran?" she asked, turning towards him. "Let the wind blow the sails to shreds while awaiting the Captain? What was Father doing? Why did he not come?"

"I told you what he was doing ... telling Lord Fabhcun to keep below, as we should be, might I add."

Pryce turned away from Aedhir and marched towards them, his brows set disagreeably, his mouth pressed in a thin, stern line. He closed his hands into fists, fuming. "Let us go below," he said, not pausing in his stride as he walked briskly past them. "You will both be safer there, and it seems we are no longer needed."

"Aye, Lieutenant," Odhran said gratefully, falling eagerly into step behind Pryce.

Aelwen hesitated, turning towards Aedhir. The Captain had moved as though he meant to follow Pryce, to catch him, but had faltered to an uncertain halt, his brows lifted unhappily. He glanced up and found Aelwen regarding him and he smiled.

"It will be alright, lad," he said.

I know it will, Father, she thought. You will take care of us.

Aedhir was a tall man; Aelwen had inherited his long legs and lean build, but he still stood nearly a half-head taller than she. He reached out and clapped his hand against the sodden wool of her sleeve and

he dropped a wink. "Give it ten minutes, maybe twenty and this will be behind us," he said. "You go with the Lieutenant now, Wen. Practice your knots. Leave this nonsense to my worry."

She gazed into his eyes, blinking against beaded raindrops caught in her lashes. So many times over the last weeks, she had wanted so desperately to tell him; her breath had tangled in her throat, the words poised on the tip of her tongue. She wanted to hug him fiercely, hold him, but she settled instead for placing her hand atop his on her arm, and offering his fingers a squeeze.

I love you, Father, she wanted to say.

"Aye, Captain," she said instead.

* * * *

Odhran caught sight of Rhyden Fabhcun standing near the fife rails of the fore mast and frowned, pausing in mid-stride. Aedhir had been delayed in coming topside because he had stopped long enough to bid the Elf remain below in his stateroom, but yet, here Rhyden was, his long, sopping hair whipping around him in the wind as he shouted something at the boatswain, Suli. Rhyden was not wearing a coat; he was dressed only in a shirt, untucked about his hips, soaked and clinging to his torso and his breeches. He had not even put shoes on and Odhran wondered if he was mad. It was freezing outside.

What is wrong with him? he thought. *Why did he not stay in his bloody room, like Captain Fainne told him?*

Suli shook his head, his brows drawn in a furrow, and when Rhyden reached for him, grasping at the sleeve of his coat, Suli shrugged forcefully away from him. Rhyden shouted again, though the wind tore his words from his mouth and Odhran could not understand what he was saying. He jabbed his forefinger toward the rigging, pointing to the main topmast, and screamed at the boatswain.

That bloody damn idiot, Odhran thought. *He's going to get himself killed!*

"Fair enough," he muttered, stumbling as the frigate rolled beneath him on the turbulent water. "If he has not the sense to dress for the weather and keep out of this mess, he gets what he deserves, I say."

Odhran watched Rhyden point again toward the rigging, his hand flapping frantically in the air and heard a peculiar sound from above, audible over the howling wind, the pelting rain; an unfamiliar groan.

What in the duchar ... ? he thought, feeling his stomach tighten at the noise. He did not know what it was, but it was loud and it could surely be nothing good.

Pryce had paused behind him, turning as well at the sound. He looked up and Odhran followed his gaze. There was a crunching sound, like splintering wood, and all of the standing rigging that ran down from the main mast to the gunwales of the ship suddenly drooped and twitched.

"What in the duchar...?" Odhran said aloud, and then he realized.

"Wen!" Pryce shouted, darting forward, his feet skittering on the wet deck in his sudden, panicked haste. "Wen—move! Move! The mast!"

Sweet Mother—the mast!

Odhran could see it now, the shaft of the main topmast. The wind had caught the sail beneath it,

billowing it fully, straining the fished juncture where the topmast had been affixed to the main beneath it. The topmast had snapped like a dried limb over a fence post and fell toward the deck below. The stays and braces, lengths of hemp rope as thick as Odhran's forearm, fell with it, and the beam tangled in them, whipping about in the wind as it plunged toward the deck.

It is going to smash broadside into the spar deck, bringing half the frigate's bloody damn rigging with it! Odhran stumbled back, his eyes widening in terror. Wen had fallen behind them as they walked to the main hatch. He could see her standing on the deck, frozen in place, her face turned towards the sky. She was right underneath the plummeting top mast, but she did not move; she stared at it, immobilized by fear, her eyes enormous, her mouth agape.

"Wen!" Odhran screamed. "Wen—look out!"

He moved, meaning to plow Pryce out of his way and grab her, but his feet slipped suddenly on the wet floor, dancing across the open margin of space where a companionway led below. He backpedaled, his arms pinwheeling, his voice escaping him in a startled yelp as he smacked the back of his head sharply against the coaming of the hatchway and toppled down into the berth deck.

* * * *

"Suli, get your crew down from the rigging! Get them abaft the main mast!" Rhyden cried, floundering across the rain-soaked spar deck toward the five rails of the fore mast.

The burly boatswain turned about as Rhyden grabbed him by the sleeve. Suli's mouth was poised in the midst of hollering directives to the hands aloft in the ratlines, and his eyes widened as he blinked at Rhyden in surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he shouted. "Get below, Lord Fabhcun—there is a bloody damn gale blowing!"

Rhyden was drenched, his soaked hair whipping into his face in the wind. He had not even thrown on a coat or shoes before dashing out of his stateroom; Trejaeran's apparition had left him with a grim imperative

Go now. Warn them. It is not too late.

and Rhyden had heeded his words, frightened and desperate.

"Get them out of the rigging!" Rhyden yelled at Suli. "The main topmast is going to break from the wind!"

Suli shrugged his arm mightily, dislodging Rhyden's hand and making him stumble. "The topsails have been furled! The wind will do nothing to that mast," he snapped, his brows drawn, his eyes flashing hotly. "And I will do nothing lest it comes out of the Captain's mouth. Go below, Lord Fabhcun before you see yourself killed."

"Your men are the ones you will see killed!" Rhyden shouted, curling his hands into fists. He thrust his forefinger toward the stern. "That main top is going to split, by my bloody damn breath, and your men who are aloft there are going to die!"

Suli blinked at him, startled anew by Rhyden's sudden, furious fire.

"I saw it, Suli!" Rhyden cried. "I saw it in my mind! Call it magic or bad luck—whatever you want—but

call your men from those riggings and get them abaft the main mast!"

Suli looked at him for a long moment, his brows pinched, his lips turned down in a frown. "You are daft, you rotted Elf," he muttered. He tilted his head back on his thick neck and bellowed toward the sky.

"Avast on the main top!" he shouted. "All hands move abaft the main mast! Avast now and bear a'hand—get your bloody asses on the deck and abaft the main mast!"

Just as the hands aloft began to move, alarmed by the sharp, urgent tone of Suli's voice, a heavy gust of wind rocked the frigate. It snapped against the main sails, extending them out in full billow, and Rhyden heard a rumbling, groaning sound from behind him. He whirled about, realizing what was happening—the main mast had shifted as the sail it bore swelled with the wind, and the yard strained the repaired joint of the topmast above it.

"No!" Rhyden cried, horrified. He heard a terrible, grinding noise as the fished joint yielded, the topmast listing in the wind and snapping loose of the main. The stays and braces running from the aloft rigging to the ship gunnels went flaccid, slackening in their blocks and pulleys, sagging without the topmast shaft to hold them taut. "No, no—Mathair Maith, no—!"

"Mother Divine..." Suli breathed in shock as the topmast fell, toppling toward the spar deck. As it fell, the mast beam dragged its ropes and rigging with it; the wind caught it and swung it about wildly on the ends of its tethers. Suli and Rhyden both dropped to their knees, throwing up their hands as the shattered mast careened toward them, swooping overhead, narrowly missing the shaft of the fore mast.

"Wen!" Rhyden heard Pryce scream out, his voice shrill with panic. He saw the lieutenant sprinting across the deck, moving toward Wen, who stood helpless and unmoving in his absolute horror beneath the path of the oncoming mast. "Wen—move!" Pryce cried. "Move! The mast!"

"Pryce!" Aedhir had seen it, too, had realized what was happening and his voice rang out as he rushed down from the quarterdeck, crying out in warning. "Pryce—no, no, damn it, go back—!"

Rhyden scrambled upright and tore off across the spar deck, running with all of his might, his bare feet slapping against the rain-soaked floor. Aedhir was reacting out of blind instinct; he loved Pryce like a son, and ran beneath the falling mast—toward his own certain death—meaning to keep Pryce from being hurt.

The topmast crashed down upon them. Rhyden had a split second to see Pryce leap forward, springing at Wen, knocking the midshipman off of his feet and toward the port side railings, and then he dove, hurling himself at Aedhir. He plowed headlong against the Captain, wrapping his arms fiercely about Aedhir's waist and sending him sprawling sideways across the deck floor, staggering and falling into the starboard rails. The entire ship shuddered as the mast slammed against the deck, splintering railings and smashing through the tarpaulin and grating covering the main hatch. The topsail yard punched down into the berth deck. Heavy, looping lines of rope tumbled in its wake; blocks, pulleys, and the torn length of furled sail falling across the spar deck.

Rhyden clapped his hand over Aedhir's head and positioned himself protectively over him. Elves had preternaturally accelerated healing abilities; an injury from falling debris that might have killed Aedhir would likely prove less devastating to him, and Rhyden tried to shield Aedhir as broken hunks of wood, ripped metal plates, coils of rope and thick pulleys rained upon his shoulders and spine. He gritted his teeth, wincing and gasping at each brutal, painful impact. He felt a large block clip him in the side of the head, nearly knocking the senses from him; something heavy and large struck the small of his back with enough force to *whoof* the breath from him.

"Rhyden," Aedhir groaned, squirming beneath him.

"Keep ... keep your head down..." Rhyden whispered as a spill of rope—a line as broad in circumference as the thickest portion of his forearm—smacked against his shoulders in a heavy pile, striking his neck and forcing a soft cry from him. He was reeling from where the block had hit his temple, his mind fading. "Keep ... your head..." he murmured, and then he fainted.

He was not out for long, no more than ten minutes, slumped over Aedhir beneath the rigging and debris. In that time, the storm waned, just as Aedhir had predicted; the gust of wind that shattered the main topmast proving to be the last, fervent effort on the tail end of the gale front as it blew past them, rushing north. Rhyden came to slowly, his eyes opening dazedly, and he moaned, feeling Aedhir move beneath him.

"Rhyden," Aedhir said, his voice a hoarse croak. "Rhyden, can you hear me?"

Suli and Lieutenant Cluer Haely, Aedhir's second officer, were shouting from somewhere close at hand, their voices overlapping; Rhyden could feel the deck thrumming with frantic footfalls as the crew scrambled over piles of rope and broken wood.

"Belay that stay, Manein!" the boatswain cried. "Put your back into it, lad! There you go!"

"Secure that line! Get it in your hands and hold it, damn you!" Haely yelled. "Pickens, you keep hold of that wheel 'til we find the Captain and he tells you otherwise. Do not let our asses turn to the wind!"

"Pitren, brace up that fore mast ... furl the fore main, bear a'hand!" Suli chimed. "She will topple on us, too, if we let her ... brace it tight now!"

With the main mast shattered, the fore mast now stood upon a vulnerable perch at the bow of the ship.

The lines and riggings that had tethered it securely to the main lay in a tangled, massive heap sprawled across the spar deck, and even though the winds were fading, the storm abandoning them, even a feeble gust risked collapsing it. If the broken section of top mast had fallen into the water, rather than at a broad diagonal across the deck, the crew would have been rushing to hack the rigging lines loose, releasing the beam into the storm's churning current. With most of it lying on the deck, however, they would likely try to salvage whatever they could of both mast and rigging.

From the sounds of things, the crew was already hard at this task, untangling the seemingly endless piles of ropes and pulleys. Some lashed the splintered mast down on the deck, running lines about it and securing it to the gunwales to keep it from rolling overboard into the undulating sea, dragging behind or beneath the ship and causing more damage. Others had already shimmied up the remaining lines, tending to the mizzen and fore masts, trying to anchor each firmly in place. Some had gone below, disappearing into the lower decks to check for hull damage and to bilge any leaking compartments. Others still dug through the rubble, searching for their injured fellows, calling out a cacophony of names in loud, frantic voices. Among these was Odhran's, shouting out desperately.

"Wen! Wen, where are you? Wen!"

"Rhyden?" Aedhir said again, drawing his mind from shadows and fog. "Answer me, Rhyden."

"I ... I am alright, Aedhir," Rhyden said, grimacing as he tried to move. They were pinned together beneath a significant heap of rope and rubble, and he felt debris shifting, slipping from his back and hips.

Something heavy and unwieldy rested against his back, nearly smothering the breath from him. "Are you hurt?"

Aedhir shook his head, his hair brushing against Rhyden's cheek. "No," he said. "Though I must say I do not think I have ever been this close to another man before."

"Much less an Elf," Rhyden said with a soft laugh that left him in pain.

"Especially an Elf," Aedhir said, and Rhyden laughed again. "Can you sit up?"

"I ... I think so," Rhyden said. He moved his arm, wincing as he shoved a tumbled length of rope from his back, along with splintered shards of wood and wrenched, misshapen bands of iron. He managed to move enough of the debris to shift his weight and sit up. Raising his head left him dizzy and reeling, and he pressed his hand against his brow.

"Are you alright?" Aedhir asked, crawling out from beneath the rubble, rising onto his knees. "You are bleeding...!"

"Something hit me," Rhyden said, closing his eyes as his vision rolled. "Hoah ... a ... a block, I think, from the rigging..."

The rain had stopped. The last edge of storm clouds had barreled through, leaving in their wake an amazing expanse of blackened sky, speckled with bright star-points. As the moon slipped free of the clouds, its pale light draped down upon the frigate, casting a luminous glow over the damaged ship. The air was suddenly still and cold; Rhyden shuddered in his sopping clothes, his dripping hair clinging to his face, his shoulders. Aedhir lifted his chin and yanked his cravat loose from beneath his great coat.

"Here," he said, reaching again for Rhyden, pressing the wadded linen against his gouged scalp. "You knew, did you not? That this would happen. You knew somehow. I saw you shouting at Suli, pointing to the main mast."

Rhyden nodded. "I saw it in my mind," he said. "Moments before it happened, I had a vision of it. Trejaeran showed it to me."

"Trejaeran Muirel?" Aedhir blinked at him, startled. "He has been dead fifteen years."

Rhyden nodded again, closing his eyes. "Yes. You can imagine my surprise, then, to have seen him in my stateroom."

"I thought Elves did not have visions anymore," Aedhir said. "Trejaeran took the sight from you all in the Second War ... there are no more Elfin prophets."

Rhyden opened one eye. "You can imagine my surprise at that, as well."

* * * *

Wen came to, her head aching miserably. She was slumped, her head and shoulders propped somewhat between two balusters along the portside railing. She tasted blood in her mouth and moaned softly. She tried to move, but there was something heavy lying on her, and she opened her eyes, blinking groggily as she tried to remember what had happened.

"Pryce," she whispered softly, aghast. He lay sprawled against her. She could feel his left forearm and

hand caught beneath the small of her back. His other hand lay draped lifelessly against her hip, and his legs rested atop hers.

They were trapped beneath a pile of thick ropes and broken spears of wood. Part of a sail had fallen on top of them; the yard had broken as the mast had swung about, and the main topsail had worked free. It was partially unfurled, draped over the railing and the side of the ship in heavy, suffocating folds, covering them.

She could feel Pryce's breath against her but he offered no reply to the mention of his name. She reached up and touched his face. "Pryce, can you hear me?"

He had saved her. He had grabbed her, leaping for her, knocking her off of her feet. They had slammed into the railing together, and then the deck beneath them had thrummed with the massive force of the mast slamming into it. Rigging ropes, blocks, pulleys, tangled ratlines ... it had all come tumbling down, and she remembered Pryce crouching over her, his hand against the cap of her head, tucking her cheek against his shoulder as the debris had rained upon them.

"Pryce, please wake up," Wen said. She thought she heard her father's voice, muffled and distant, and she nearly wept. He had been right behind her on the spar deck; she had heard him scream Pryce's name in bright and frantic alarm only seconds before Pryce had grabbed her. *Father! He is alright!* she thought. *He was not hurt!*

She almost cried out to him, calling him *Father* before she realized her mind's frightened, bewildered erring. "Captain Fainne!" she shouted instead. Her voice was cracked and hoarse. Her bottom lip was split and bruised, and opening her mouth hurt. Drawing in breath ached as well and crying out caused an insistent, brutal throb to stoke beneath her temples. "Captain Fainne!" she called again. "Here! Please ... we are over here!"

Pryce stirred at the sound of her voice, moaning softly and drawing her gaze. As Wen turned her face down, he lifted his chin, his nose brushing against hers, his mouth so near, she might have kissed him. She fell still at his proximity, the gentle press of his breath against her mouth. He murmured quietly without opening his eyes, his brows lifting as though the effort to speak hurt him. "I ... I will do it..." he whispered. "Just ... give me a moment..."

"It is alright," she said softly, as his chin slumped again, dropping toward his chest. She drew her arm about him, holding him against her. "Father will find us, Pryce. He is coming."

With her free hand, Aelwen reached up, trying to shove some of ropes and debris aside. The sail was enormous, sodden and heavy beyond belief. If she had been able to move enough to gain a little leverage, she might have been able to find a hem, shove it aside, but she was fairly well immobilized, pinned by Pryce's unconscious form. A large beam of wood, a section of the topsail yard that had broken loose when the mast hit the deck, had fallen across their legs, and she could not wriggle out from beneath it, either.

"Bloody rot," she said quietly.

And then she heard Odhran calling out her name. He sounded like he was close-by, nearly on top of her, his voice was so clear and loud.

"Wen! Wen, where are you?"

"Odhran!" she cried, pawing helplessly at the sail. "Odhran ... here! Here I am! Help me!"

She felt something slap against the sail from the opposite side; Odhran's hands, tearing at the canvas. His weight fell against her legs as he stumbled over the yard beam, hidden beneath the sail. "Wen!"

She felt the canvas sheet above her move, and suddenly the hot, stifling air beneath it was gone. The cold, light breeze of the night met her face, and she gasped, drawing in a deep mouthful.

"Wen!" Odhran cried again, looking down at her, struggling to jerk the sail away. She burst into tears and reached for him, holding her hand out, her fingers splayed and trembling.

"Odhran...!" she gasped, and he fell against her, clutching at her.

"Did you find them?" she heard Aedhir call out, his voice anxious, nearly panicked as he rushed toward them. He saw Pryce slumped against Aelwen, and his face twisted with anguish. He uttered a soft, pained cry and he collapsed beside of them on his knees.

"Pryce...!" he gasped, reaching for the younger man.

Wen wept all the harder to see the pain in her father's eyes. He did not know who she was; in his heart's regard, she was little more than an affable stranger to him, a young man named Wenham Poel. Aedhir had practically raised Pryce. In many ways, Pryce had taken the place in his heart her absence had left vacant. Pryce was Aedhir's son in every way that mattered, as he was Pryce's father.

Aedhir gathered Pryce in his arms, folding himself over the younger man. "Pryce," he said. "I am here. It is Aedhir, Pryce, I am here ... oh, my boy ... I ... I will never forgive myself..."

Odhran slipped his strong arms around Wen's shuddering shoulders. She buried her face in the sodden lapels of Odhran's coat and wept. "It is alright," Odhran whispered. "Please do not cry. You will break me, Wen. Please ... it is alright."

Chapter Four

AFTERMATH

"We are at fifty-one degrees north latitude, bearing north-northeast," Aedhir said, leaning over his desk and peering down at a spread of parchment maps and course books. He stood in conference with Lieutenant Haely and Eisab Pickens, the helmsman. The midshipmen, Wen and Odhran stood together nearby, watching the officers quietly.

Aedhir tapped his fingertip against one of the maps and frowned. "We are in the Ionium current, then," he said, glancing at Haely.

The lieutenant nodded, his mouth set in a grim line. "Suli said the top main sail is torn. Even if we rig another mast shaft to the main and run a yard beam, we cannot use the sail." He met Aedhir's gaze. "That was our spare. We did not have time to get another at Cuan'darach."

It was nearly three hours since the storm had passed them, almost dawn, and already fourteen crew members had been found dead. Another thirty were injured and below deck in the hold, receiving

treatment from the shipboard surgeon and apothecary; eleven yet remained unaccounted for, and were feared overboard, lost at sea.

Pryce was resting comfortably in his stateroom, a wound to the back of his head near the base of his skull stitched and dressed. Rhyden had come to Pryce's stateroom an hour or so ago, bearing in hand a linen-wrapped bundle. He had asked to see Pryce.

"My mother was once of the Banaltra among the Donnag'crann," he had told Aedhir. "An Elfin healer. I have learned a great deal from her. Please, let me see him."

Aedhir had watched Rhyden clean, suture and dress Pryce's wounds with the meticulous skill of a university-trained physician. He had been able to rouse Pryce from unconsciousness, opening his linen-wrapped bundle and taking in hand what appeared to Aedhir to be a small, fat twig or root.

"What is that?" he had asked.

Rhyden had glanced at him and winked. "Draiocht," he said in Gaeilgen. "Elf magic."

He had snapped the twig in half beneath Pryce's nose, and Aedhir had caught a whiff of something strong, but not unpleasant, like fresh mint. Pryce had stirred, his brows lifting as he turned his head, his legs moving feebly beneath his blankets.

"How did you do that?" Aedhir had asked Rhyden later, as he had gathered together his supplies, tucking them together in a bundle. "My surgeon could not wake Pryce at all."

"Your surgeon is likely of the barber-variety, like most in Tiralainn," Rhyden had said. "He means no harm, but he is untrained, relying archaic, fairly worthless techniques to treat injuries. Apothecaries are not much better, I think. They have taken perfectly good herbal healing remedies and bastardized them into watered-down, impotent poultices and infusions." He had glanced at Aedhir. "No offense."

"None drawn," Aedhir said, yet astounded by Rhyden's seemingly miraculous healing abilities.

Pryce was awake, but groggy still and Rhyden had offered to sit with him awhile, as Aedhir met in counsel with his officers. Aedhir looked up from his maps, turning to Wen. The young midshipman looked tired and haggard, but had regained his composure in the wake of the storm. "Wen, do you know what the Ionium current is?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," Wen said, nodding politely. "The winter wind and water paths between Tiralainn and the Morthir from the Ionium Sea."

Aedhir smiled at him. Of the two midshipmen, Wen struck him as the one with the most potential. He lacked Odhran's physical size and strength, but he was very bright, relatively bold and, unlike his friend, unafraid of a challenge. "Tell me, Wen, given our current circumstances, what does this present us with?"

"Captain Fainne, if I may," Haely said, just as Wen, looking pleased to be asked for his input, drew breath to speak. Haely clearly did not think this was a good time for midshipman instruction; his disapproval was plain to see in his furrowed brows, his downturned lips.

"Have peace, Haely," Aedhir said, holding up his palm to stay the lieutenant's voice. "I would hear Wen's thoughts on the matter."

"The Ionium current is a strong northward stream, sir," Wen replied. "We have lost half our main mast, sir, and a topsail besides. We cannot likely turn south as we should, sir. We will have to make port somewhere along the north coast of the Morthir, and make repairs before we sail again for Cneas."

"Excellent, Mister Poel. You are absolutely right," Aedhir said, and though Wen contained his smile, his eyes were bright and alight at the praise.

Aedhir turned back to Haely. "We will go north by the wind," he said. "If it keeps in our favor, the current will carry us to Lunan Bay by day's end."

"We could be at Cradle Bay by midday," Haely said, tapping his finger against a map.

"That bay is naught but shoals," Aedhir said, shaking his head. "And Novara, the city there, is very rural, mostly fishermen. Even if we anchored off-shore, we would still have to wait for supplies, sails, a new mast to be shipped. We will go directly to Lunan Bay ... to Capua. It is the largest northern port in the Torachan empire. We can dock the ship there and see repairs tended to swiftly. We can arrange for another vessel to bring Lord Fabhcun south to Cneas from there ... or wherever he may wish to go."

"Captain Fainne, sir, if I may," Odhran said, drawing Aedhir's gaze. The young midshipman looked unhappy, and somewhat anxious as he stared down at his toes.

"Of course, Odhran, speak freely," Aedhir said.

Odhran glanced up at him. "Sir, how long would we be laid up in Capua?"

"For repairs? No longer than we would in Cneas, I am certain ... four weeks at the most. We have an iron shipment in the lower hold due in Cneas, so we would need to turn south again to see it unloaded ... another week, maybe two, unless we all do not wish to be paid." Aedhir raised his brow and smiled. "Why, lad? Something pressing awaits you in Tiralainn?"

"No ... no, sir," Odhran said quietly, turning his eyes down to his shoes again. "My parents, sir, that is all. They would expect word from me upon our arrival in Cneas, and they will worry without it, sir."

"There are courier fleets in Capua, as well as Cneas, lad," Aedhir told him, walking over and resting his hand lightly against Odhran's shoulder. "We will send word to them. Do not fret for it."

This reassurance did not seem to assuage Odhran's anxiety in the least, but he nodded his head slowly. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Why do you both not retire below and get some rest?" Aedhir said. "It has been a difficult night for us all. Haely and I have some course charting to attend to, and it will prove a busy day, I think."

Odhran nodded again. "Yes, sir."

"Aye, Captain," Wen said. He was looking at Odhran out of the corner of his eyes, his brows lifted, his expression worried and troubled. Aedhir did not need magic or visions to realize something was amiss ... something they were not sharing with him. He knew well enough from his own experiences with Pryce, who could be as tight-lipped as a well-corked bottle of dahlberry wine when he set his mind to the task, that there would be no prodding information from them that they were unwilling to freely yield.

He looked at Wen until he attracted the young man's gaze. Wen blinked at him somewhat sheepishly,

and he averted his eyes to the floor.

"You are both excused, then," Aedhir said.

"Thank you, sir," Wen said with a nod.

* * * *

"Odhran, I am sorry," Wen said. Odhran had not said a word on their way to their stateroom. He had marched ahead of her, his brows drawn, his lips pressed together, his hands closed into frustrated fists and she had practically sprinted to match his brisk stride.

She sat on the edge of her cot now, looking at him, watching as he tossed his coat against the foot of his bed and jerked his cravat loose.

"I am sorry," she said again, still eliciting no reply. His movements were swift and forceful; he nearly wrenched buttons loose of their threads as he opened his waistcoat and shrugged it from his shoulders.

"Will you talk to me, please?"

He paused, turning towards her. "What do you want me to say, Wen?" he asked. "Fourteen men are dead. You heard the Captain ... fourteen men." He loosened his cuff links and slapped them against the washstand with enough force to make her jump, startled. "Eleven yet missing. They think they were swept overboard ... into the bloody damn sea, Wen." He sat facing her, resting his elbows against his thick knees, and pressed his palms against his face. "We should go back, you and me on a ship, over the sea, back to Tiralainn where we belong."

"This is where I belong," Wen told him quietly.

"No, this is where you will die," he said, his voice sharp. "Do you have any idea how frantic I was with worry for you? I thought you had been knocked into the ocean. I could scarcely breathe, my mind and heart were so panicked, and I..."

She went to him, kneeling before him, pressing her hands against his cheeks. "I am alright, Odhran."

"I thought you were dead," he said softly, stricken.

"I am alright," she said again.

"Let us go back to Tiralainn. Please, Wen."

"I cannot," she said. "He is my father, Odhran."

"He can be your father as well in Tiralainn as on the sea. Come back with me. Tell Captain Fainne the truth, and let us just go."

Wen lowered her eyes to the ground. "I cannot," she whispered. "I cannot tell him now. Not after all of this. It is too soon, and his heart is with Pryce, his ship and crew. That is what he knows and loves ... not me, not yet." Odhran drew in breath to speak, and she cut him off. "Give me time, Odhran. Please, just let me do this in my own time. I will. I promise. It has been so long ... so many years, and I do not want to hurt him."

"I cannot take this anymore, Wen," he said. "It is too much and I want to go home. Fourteen men dead,

eleven lost at sea and any of them could have been us. And now four weeks in Capua, another two in Cneas. Six weeks until we leave for Tiralainn. It is finished for me, Wen. This is going to ruin me. They will expel me from the university for certain."

"We will send word to them," she said. "A letter by courier from Capua. We will tell them what has happened. You can still make it in time for the spring term ... you can keep your appointment to the historian's program, Odhran. Pryce told me that Lord Fabhcun might sail to Tiralainn once more. He has changed his mind about staying in Cneas. You could return with him. I will buy your fare, even."

"I am not going on another sea voyage with that Elf," Odhran said. "I will be doing well enough to survive this one."

Aelwen blinked at him. "Odhran, Lord Fabhcun is not to blame for what has happened. It was a storm."

"That is not what the crew thinks ... what they have thought all along," he said. "I heard them on the deck, talking to one another as they worked, as we looked through the debris."

"What they think and what is true are two very different..."

"Wen, you were there! He threw something overboard. How peculiar ... and convenient, might I add ... that shortly after this, such a storm comes upon us, after nearly three weeks in full of calm seas and fair skies."

"No, what is peculiar is that we have had such sky and sea for so long. Storms happen, Odhran. There is nothing you can throw overboard that can conjure up a storm."

"Not you or I, maybe, but an Elf could," he said. Wen rolled her eyes, annoyed and exasperated, and she stood, walking back to her bunk. "What? Why do you scoff? Elves know magic, Wen, and plenty of it, too! Nimon Hodder says they can put spells on you, and curses, too."

"Nimon Hodder is an ignorant bigot," Wen said, scowling. She turned down her coverlets and crawled into bed. "You have known Elves in Belgaeran, Odhran. Did you ever see any of them work magic? Cast a spell? Summon a storm?"

"Rhyden Fabhcun is no ordinary Elf," Odhran said. "You know this. You have read of him. His life has been anything but ordinary. And I have been thinking ... remember the storms that swept through Belgaeran during the Samhradh celebration week? The tornadoes that ripped up the palace and cathedral and half the city proper, at least?"

Wen lay on her side facing him, drawing her knees toward her chest. "Do not tell me you think Rhyden Fabhcun caused these as well."

"He was there, Aelwen, in Belgaeran when it happened. It makes a sort of sense."

"It makes no sense whatsoever."

"It has been nearly three hundred years since a tornado blew near to Belgaeran. Never in the city's history have more than one struck in one season, much less one week. Rhyden Fabhcun had not set foot in Belgaeran for five years at least until the Samhradh, or so I heard tell. He was there, and the storms came. He is here with us, and again, a storm came."

"Do you hear yourself, Odhran? Do you realize how ridiculous you sound?"

"Hodder thinks he has put a spell on your father. That is why we left Tiralainn early, before the main topmast was fixed, why he has seemed so distracted of late and why he was delayed in his arrival to the bridge tonight."

"And what, precisely would Rhyden gain from such magic?" Wen asked. "He is on this ship with the rest of us, Odhran. Why in the Bith would he try to bring harm to it, to the crew? He cannot bloody well swim to Cneas. And if Father has been distracted of late, it is only because he has had to endure these ridiculous notions and rumors against Lord Fabhcun, and his patience wears thin."

Odhran drew back his quilts and reclined in his bed, folding his hands against his chest and gazing up at the ceiling. "Rhyden used magic to rouse Pryce Finamur."

"He used the fragrance of freamh'miontas ... mint root sap ... to wake Pryce, not magic," Wen said. "I was there. I saw it."

"I was there, too," he said, glancing at her. "And I heard him look at your father and say it was draiocht ... Elf magic."

Wen rolled onto her other side, presenting her back to him. "You are being bloody daft, Odhran. I cannot believe you would think such nonsense. Turn down the light and go to sleep."

* * * *

Odhran rolled over, reaching for his bedside table and dimming the wick of the lantern until the flame snuffed and darkness enfolded the stateroom. He lay on his back once more, but did not fall asleep. He remained still and quiet for a long time, listening as Wen's breath grew slow and deep from across the room. When he was certain that she was sleeping, he turned his head, peering through the darkness. "Wen?" he whispered.

She offered no reply, and he pushed his blankets back. He sat up, swinging his legs around, letting his feet drop quietly against the floor. He reached down, fumbling beneath his bed until he found his shoes. He stood, moving silently, shrugging his way into his great coat again.

Odhran crept to the door, opening it slowly, wincing as it creaked on its hinges. Wen muttered in her sleep; he heard her shifting about beneath her quilts and he froze. She did not stir, settling herself comfortably once more and falling still and quiet. Odhran opened the door another brief margin, just wide enough to could squeeze his broad form across the threshold and out into the corridor beyond.

* * * *

"How is he?" Aedhir asked Rhyden, standing in the doorway to Pryce's room.

Rhyden was seated in a chair beside the lieutenant's bed, with a book he had found on Pryce's writing table opened in his lap. He glanced up from his reading and smiled at the Captain. "He is resting comfortably," he said. "For now, anyway. He keeps coming to, wanting to get up, so I gave him some molwort tea to help him sleep. He is rather stubborn."

Aedhir managed a smile. "I have been a bad influence on him," he said. He knelt beside the bed and slipped his fingers against Pryce's palm. He stroked his other hand against Pryce's tousled hair, brushing it back from his brow, his face softening into sorrow.

"He will be alright," Rhyden said. "He has a fairly nasty concussion, but he might have known much worse."

"You must be exhausted," Aedhir said, turning to Rhyden. "I will stay with him awhile. Why do you not let Mister Feldwick escort you back to your stateroom? Get some sleep."

Rhyden looked toward the doorway, finding Thierley Feldwick, *thea'Maorga's* master-at-arms standing there, his broad shoulders and burly chest filling the entire threshold. Rhyden arched his brow at Aedhir, his expression quizzical.

"Mister Feldwick is my master-at-arms," Aedhir said.

"We have met, yes," Rhyden said, still curious.

Aedhir looked sheepish all at once, and averted his eyes to the floor. "I have asked him if he would mind to remain with you for a time," he said. "Outside of your door."

Rhyden nodded, realizing. He looked down at the slim volume of poetry he had borrowed from Pryce. "Your crew thinks it is my fault," he said. "That I have brought this upon us."

"Did you see that in a vision?" Aedhir asked.

Rhyden glanced at him. "No, I see that with my eyes," he said, drawing a chuckle from the captain. "I would have to be blind to miss it."

"I do not think that, Rhyden," Aedhir said. He glanced at the master-at-arms. "Mister Feldwick, would you grant us a moment behind closed doors, please?"

"Aye, Captain," Feldwick said with a nod. He stepped back, drawing his hulking frame away from the threshold. He caught the doorknob in one large hand and pulled it shut.

When he was gone, Aedhir returned his attention to Rhyden, meeting his gaze. "What has happened is not your fault," he said.

"Maybe it is, Aedhir," Rhyden said, looking pained. He stood, cradling the book between his hands, turning it anxiously, absently from side to side. "I have been thinking about it, and..."

"You cannot call the weather, Rhyden, and you are not bad luck," Aedhir said. "It is unfortunate circumstance that has brought us where we are."

"I cannot call the weather, no," Rhyden agreed quietly. "But I might have brought this on us anyway, without realizing it. That box I threw overboard ... it contained something very powerful. Not to me, or you, or anyone else on this ship, but to one person, a boy I know in Tiralainn. A boy who asked me to get rid of it."

Aedhir looked at him, his brow raised. "What was it?"

"Do you know why the Second Shadow War occurred?" Rhyden said.

Aedhir shrugged. "Lahnduren hired an army to revolt against Kierken," he said. "A failed attempt to usurp the Crown."

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Rhyden said. "That is what history books tell us. There is another truth to it, Aedhir, one no one speaks much of. Lahnduren had found a talisman, a book of magic spells, the Book of Shadows. It had belonged to Ciardha."

Aedhir blinked, startled. "Ciardha?" he whispered. "The Cailleach? The witch Queen of the First War? The one who..."

"Would have seen our realm fall to the dark sway of her duchar? The one Trejaeran and Qynh killed? Yes. It was her book of magic, but it was a book Lahnduren believed ... as we all did ... could only be used with the aid of another talisman ... a sister totem, the Shadow Stone. We thought Ciardha had found the Stone, and that its dark powers had broken her, made her evil. She had hidden the Stone eons ago, but revealed its location in the pages of the Book of Shadows. Lahnduren was seeking the Stone, to use the power of the talismans to seize the throne from Kierken."

"But he was stopped," Aedhir said.

Rhyden nodded. "Trejaeran stopped him, took the Book from him before Lahnduren could find the Stone. The Book was written in Ciardha's language ... the tongue of the ancient and long-gone race of the Na'Siogai. Lahnduren knew how to read it; Trejaeran used his powers to take this knowledge from

Lahnduren's mind, but he realized that any Elf possessed of even a modicum of the sight could be reached by the Book's fell sway. The Book could use our sight against us, tempt us with its power, give to our minds the knowledge to read from it. That is why Trejaeran stripped the sight from us all, to keep us safe from the Book. That is why he died. He was left alone with the sight, and the Book's sway was very powerful. He killed himself to keep from falling to that sway ... to the Shadow. He died to protect us."

"That is what you brought on my ship?" Aedhir asked him, his eyes growing wide. "You brought that thing, that Book with you?"

Rhyden shook his head. "I burned the Book in Belgaeran. I had promised Trejaeran when he died that I would see it destroyed for him. I gave him my word, but my father tricked me. He and Kierken kept the Book. I was injured in the war, and I did not realize for a long time ... ten years that the Book remained.

"Kierken hoped to use the Book for good, to translate the pages somehow, find the Stone and use them together for good purpose. But we were wrong, Aedhir. Everything we believed about the Stone, the Book, it was all wrong ... the Book's power died with Trejaeran. Without any Elves remaining with the sight, its power could not reach us."

"But you said you had a vision," Aedhir said, visibly puzzled. "If Trejaeran took the sight ... if it died with him ... how could you have had a vision of the storm, the topmast breaking?"

"Because I think when I saw Trejaeran, it meant he is giving it back to me," Rhyden said. "He told me my mind was awakening. I think he meant the sight is restoring somehow within me. We were wrong about the Book, and we were wrong about the Stone. It did not make Ciardha evil. Her heart was black and twisted from the first. The Stone chooses its bearers ... it chooses four bearers, Aedhir, and to each it gives an elemental power of creation or destruction. It chose Ciardha and gave her power over water. It chose my friend Kaevir, and gave him the wind."

"Wind..." Aedhir said softly, dawning realization in his eyes.

"Kaevir did not want the power. He is a good man, and he used the Stone to serve selfless purpose ... to save his friends, to keep Kierken from being murdered, and then he rejected it. The Stone, the power over the wind ... he abandoned them, locked the Stone in that iron crate, gave it to me. He asked me to cast it into the sea, that he might be rid of it. That we all might be rid of it."

Rhyden stared at Aedhir, remorseful and anguished. "The Stone wants to be with its chosen bearer. It knows no other purpose but this, and it will try however it is able to return to Kaevir, as long as he lives. He had hoped by locking it in the box, by throwing it into the Muir Fuar, it could not make its way back to him. I had hoped this, too, and I think we were both right. It cannot get out of the box, but it would have tried. It would have been angry that it could not."

"A stone can be angry?"

"An elemental power ... a talisman as old as time itself ... can. I think that is what caused the storm, damaged the ship, hurt your crew." Rhyden looked pained. "I think I caused it, Aedhir. I did not mean to ... I never would have done it if I had thought ... known that..."

"You did not cause the storm, Rhyden," Aedhir said. "Some rock in a box did not cause it, either, or any talisman or Elf magic. The sea currents ... wind and water ... caused the storm, when the warm Mercach current met the colder Ionium along the forty-fifth parallel."

"Aedhir..." Rhyden began.

"You know what you know, and I know what I know," Aedhir told him. "You say that stone was magical. Fine. I have told you ... I do not know of magic. Maybe it is real, maybe it is rot. Who am I to say? I know the sea, Rhyden. I know storms at sea. I saw this one coming and I did not need Elfin sight to do it. All day long, the signs of it were in front of me ... long before you tossed your talisman overboard. I chose to disregard the warning signs in the sky, the wind and water. I have not been myself this voyage ... my mind has been anywhere but here, and I am to blame for what has happened. Not you."

"You do not know that," Rhyden said.

Aedhir stood. "Rhyden, we left Cuan'darach port early on my account," he said. "I knew the topmast needed replacing. I knew we had no spare sail for the yard in our hold, but I set sail anyway, knowing fully well if we encountered a storm ... which we were likely to do, given the season and the ocean currents this time of the year ... there was a very good chance that fished mast beam would break in the wind. I knew it. I chose to go anyway."

Rhyden blinked at him, startled and bewildered.

"Bringing you to Cneas was as good an explanation as any," Aedhir said. "I wanted to leave Tiralainn because there is trouble for me there ... trouble I have brought upon myself. I hit a nobleman, drove my fist into his face, and I left rather than face the constable. The matter would have been cleared, but we would have been laid up until the spring. My crew would not have been able to sail ... or get paid ... for months. I could not do that to them, not for my mistake, not on my account. They are good men. Occasional bigots, yes, but good men still the same."

"Why did you hit a nobleman?" Rhyden asked.

Aedhir smirked with little humor. "Because the bastard stole my wife. And for seventeen years, he told

my daughter I was dead. I have not seen my Aelwen since she was five ... they kept her from me, and my letters from her. Years' worth of letters, Rhyden. Aelwen found them, wrote to me, telling me of all this. The letter was waiting for me upon my arrival at Cuan'darach, and I snapped. I could not think with any reason. I went to his house and punched him."

He walked over to Rhyden. "Technically, I have stolen this ship. I did not have orders from the Crown to embark six weeks early for Cneas. They would not have let me leave with a warrant for bodily assault issued against me. I knew it, and I left anyway. So as you might imagine, I am in a bit of a pinch whenever I make my way to Tiralainn again."

"What will they do to you when you return?" Rhyden asked.

Aedhir's smirk widened into a crooked grin. "Likely revoke my rank," he said. "Take the ship from me, toss me in jail for awhile, give me a day or three in the pillory for good measure and probably a public flogging."

"Aedhir...!" Rhyden gasped, stricken.

"That is my concern, Rhyden ... my fault ... not yours," Aedhir told him. "All of this is upon me. My men are dead and Pryce..." His brows lifted in sorrow. "Pryce is hurt because of me. Not you, Rhyden. I made a grievous error in judgement, and I will never forgive myself for it. I would give anything in the Bith ... all that I have ... to take it back, but I cannot."

"What will you do?" Rhyden asked.

"We are sailing north," Aedhir said. "Even if Suli can rig me a top mast, we would struggle to draw enough sail to fight the current and the wind and turn south for Cneas. So we will let the wind lead us northward to Lunan Bay, to Capua. I have enough money saved to pay my crew from my pocket for the trip, to offer retribution to the families of those we lost, and from there, I will either muster some mettle and return to Tiralainn, face my due, or I will run like a coward and make a life for myself in Torach. I have not decided yet."

He clapped his hand against Rhyden's shoulder. "Do not worry for it. I will see that we find you another ship in Capua, one that will take you to Cneas, or back to Tiralainn, if that is what you want."

"I do not think I will return to Tiralainn," Rhyden said. "I was mistaken. There is nothing for me there, after all."

"There is plenty for me there," Aedhir said, managing a laugh. "And none of it I particularly want."

"I would take it from you, if I could," Rhyden said.

Aedhir smiled. "You have done enough for me, more than I have ever had the right to ask. You saved my life tonight. And you helped my boy. Do not think I will forget."

Rhyden looked down at the floor, troubled and unhappy. "Go with Mister Pickens and find some rest," Aedhir said. "We should arrive in Capua by this evening. I will have Wen or Odhran bring your meals to your stateroom, and you can relax, leave this to me. I am sorry to ask it of you, but..."

"But your crew will likely lynch me if they have the chance," Rhyden said.

"I will not let them do that," Aedhir said firmly. "No harm will come to you on my ship ... by my breath, I promise you, Rhyden. I do not think they will try anything, but they are frightened and confused, and I would rather see their attentions diverted towards the tasks needed at hand."

"I understand," Rhyden said.

"Do not tell anyone else about the box, this stone you spoke of," Aedhir added in a low voice. "Like I said, I do not know of magic or talismans, but there is stir enough aboard without the wrong set of ears catching mention of that."

Rhyden nodded.

"I will buy you a pint in Capua to make up for this," Aedhir told him, and Rhyden smiled, despite himself. "Two pints, even ... and two-fingers' worth of the best brimague we can find."

"That sounds fair," Rhyden said.

"It is not fair," Aedhir said. "It is anything but, and I am sorry Rhyden. It is the best I can do for the moment. Give me the chance ... I will make it up to you in full."

Chapter Five

IN CAPUA

"Have you any golden falcons for sale?" Aigiarn Chinuajin asked the falcon trader. He was a round and distinctly malodorous man, with heavy jowls enfolding his jaw line and obscuring any delineation between neck and shoulders. His pate was bald, his entire face greasy with a sheen of sweat a good bathing might have taken care of, had he made the effort. He was fond of a rather large, wooden pipe he kept balanced against the cradle of his wide, left palm, and a blend of weeds that wafted a stinking cloud of smoke with each puff. The stench of the smoke and the man's appearance offended her. Had it not seemed so imperative to Temuchin and Yeb that they sell the gyrfalcons that afternoon before the sun set, Aigiarn might have turned on the broad, thick heel of her gugal and left the gloomy, fetid shop.

The trader glanced at her, raising his brow. He had been admiring the gyrfalcons, watching them with undisguised fascination at the large, white raptors perched together in pairs within their mews, preening one another and returning his gaze with bored disinterest. "I have never even heard of a golden falcon," he said, his bloated lips lending a rasping lisp to his words. He gave her a look from beneath heavy eyelids that she interpreted as: *Ignorant barbarian*.

Aigiarn struggled not to let the furrow between her brows grow any deeper. Temuchin had said this was important ... urgent, in fact ... and this was the last falconer they had been able to find in the entire, crowded city of Capua.

None of the others had ever heard of a golden falcon, either, and they had all presented Aigiarn and Toghrul with this same, contemptuous stare for asking *Ignorant barbarians*. She was used to such a reaction, although she would never grow accustomed to it. For ages, her people, the Oirat had been looked upon as savages ... primitive, illiterate and crude ... and there would be no avoiding this derisive regard whenever they ventured beyond the meager borders of their own territory of Nuqut, in Ulus to the northeast. Her heritage was apparent in her clothing and face, as was Toghrul's and anyone else of the

Oirat. With her black hair, gold-hued complexion, almond-shaped eyes, and soft, rounded facial features, there was no mistaking Aigiarn's foreign, Uluisian descent among the rest of the Torachan Empire.

She was proud of her race, despite such scornful regard, and had made no effort to hide it during this visit to Capua. She wore the traditional winter garb of her nomadic people ... a fur-lined, woolen coat called a del that fell to her knees, with heavy pants beneath tucked and bound with broad straps of hide into her leather gutal, or boots. The del fastened at her right shoulder, the overlapping breasts offering her chest and torso and added measure of protection against the bitter winds and icy temperatures of the Nuqut plains and foothills. It was loosely lashed about her waist with a behen, a long woolen sash wrapped above her hips. The cuffs and collar were lined with thick bands of burlagh fur, as was the broad cuff of her hat, which settled low upon her brow and covered her ears. Her hair fell from beneath the hat in a thick, hastily fashioned plait nearly to her buttocks.

The Oirat had dressed in such a manner for centuries. They had never fallen prey to the haphazard and impractical fashions of the more "civilized" neighboring realms. The trader wore what was considered stylish apparel among the southern Torachans, a prissy ensemble of ruffled linen blouse, some manner of frilled sash about his neck, a garishly bright red vest and topcoat embroidered in matching patterns of gold and cerulean threading, breeches that buttoned at his knees to reveal white stockings and ridiculous, glossy shoes adorned with high, wedged heels and broad, gold buckles.

The trader looked at Toghrul as he brought his pipe stem to his mouth and drew another puff of smoke into his lungs. "We were discussing a price for these gyrs, I do believe," he said. "You asked thirty thousand dorotus for them, and I countered at fifteen."

He had been doing this all along. Aigiarn had initiated their bartering, but he kept summarily dismissing her as though she was not even in the room. Granted, of the two of them, Toghrul physically appeared as though he would be the one with whom to deal. He was taller than Aigiarn by a full head, lean, long-legged and broad-shouldered. He was handsome, with wide-set eyes and brows that angled sharply from the bridge of his nose towards his temples and lent his face a commanding attentiveness that naturally drew one's regard.

Toghrul glanced out of the corner of his eye at Aigiarn, amused by the trader's disrespectful deference, because he knew it aggravated her. Her name meant *shining moon of the wolf* in the Uluisian tongue, and he had long been fond to call her *chinua бага*, or *little wolf* in reference not only to her diminutive height, but her fierce personality, as well.

"We asked for nothing," Aigiarn told the trader, her gloved hands closing into fists. "We told you thirty thousand dorotus for the two pairs, and you insulted us by offering us fifteen."

Temuchin had been most insistent on the price. He had sat at the stern of their sailing knar, looking up at his mother from his bench. He had been nibbling on a strap of dried burlagh meat, his dark eyes thoughtful. "Thirty thousand dorotus," he had told her. "That is what you must get for the gyrs."

They did not trade falcons so far to the south of their territory, but made frequent habit of trading with closer neighbors in the realm of Lydia to the west. They did well to get five thousand dorotus per mating pair among the Lydians. The likelihood of finding a trader willing to barter six times that amount was abysmal, and Aigiarn knew it. "Why thirty thousand?" she had asked her son.

Temuchin had looked up at her and shrugged, chewing on his lunch. "I do not know, Mamma," he said. "That is just what is in my head. It needs to be thirty thousand."

"My dear lady," the trader said to Aigiarn, the corner of his lip curling slightly, as though he sneered at the polite reference. "You insult me by wasting my most valuable time, bartering for birds of such obvious worthlessness. Fifteen thousand is what I would give you ... and it is a generous offer at that for these wretches."

"These wretches, as you call them, will net you thirty thousand apiece when you ship them south to the noble homes in Cneas," Aigiarn said. "They are full-blooded Ulusian gyrs in pristine health, with immaculate plumage. Hand-fed and coddled from their clutch, they are tame as lambs, and skilled hunters. They are prizes."

"Prizes worth fifteen thousand dorotus, my lady," the trader told her. "That is my offer. Take it or get hence."

"Fine," she said, snatching one of the mews in hand. The falcons inside squawked indignantly as they jostled together. She nodded sharply at Nakhu, one of Toghrul's Kelet guards who had accompanied them that day, and he took the other mew. The three of them turned and walked toward the door, Aigiarn leading the way in a brisk, furious march. The trader let them get half-way to the threshold before he ducked around his counter and followed.

"Twenty," he called out, staying Aigiarn in her pace.

She turned to him. "Thirty."

"Twenty-five," he offered.

She turned around again for the door. "Thirty."

The trader looked at Toghrul and began to laugh. "Mother Above, sir, does your wife not know how to compromise?"

The Oirat did not adhere to the Torachan belief in one deity, one divine Creator who governed them all. They believed in the Tengri ... spirits of Father Earth and Mother Sky, and their children, the elemental spirits of wind, water and fire. They believed that men possessed three souls ... the seni, or soul that animated the body and retreated into a lower realm of existence upon death to await rebirth; the ami, or the soul that animated the mind and roosted in the form of birds among the boughs of a great spirit tree in the upper realm awaiting reincarnation and the suld, the soul that returned among ancestral generations. Suld spirits offered guidance to those intuitive enough to sense them, usually shamans. The seni and ami spirits co-existed in harmony within everyone, in a universal balance called the Tegsh. By living an upright and respectful life, one maintained his or her own personal Tegsh, earned buyan, or blessings of the Tengri for these efforts, and ensured the Tegsh of the world around them.

Aigiarn turned to the falcon trader and met his gaze evenly. "I am not his wife," she told him. "And no, I do not know how to compromise."

* * * *

"Thirty thousand dorotus," Toghrul said as the three of them walked along the crowded streets of Capua's merchant district toward the Lunan Bay waterfront. His voice was pleased, his eyes bright with excitement. "All along, we have traded with the Lydians for pittances, when we might have brought our gyrs here for six-fold the barter."

"We are safe trading among the Lydians," Aigiarn said. "The passage to Capua is too long and dangerous to make a habit."

"Thirty thousand dorotus," he said again. He turned to Aigiarn. "We should take it and stop at Bora Cove, the village of Leucas on our way north once more to buy grain and root vegetables to stock the winter stores in full."

"The money is not for that, Toghrul," Aigiarn said.

"We do not know what the money is for," Toghrul replied. "Temu has not seen its purpose. Even bugu Yeb does not know."

"It is not so we can buy stocks in Leucas. We have stores already in reserve."

"Even ten thousand dorotus could feed four tribes through the spring. There is no store than cannot stand some extra," he said. "The winter is proving harsh. We will need all we can."

"If we spent ten on stores, that will leave only twenty," Aigiarn said. "Temu said we would need thirty."

"Then we tell Temu twenty is all we could get," Toghrul said. He caught Aigiarn by the sleeve of her del, drawing her to a halt. "Aigiarn, every winter our numbers dwindle from cold and hunger. Now we have been forced into the foothills ... our prospects are even bleaker. You know this. Our people cannot go hungry while we hoard money for no apparent reason."

"No apparent reason yet," she said, shrugging her shoulder to dislodge his hand. She frowned at him. "Temu said thirty thousand dorotus, Toghrul. Whatever it is for, it is meant to help us find the lair."

"Will you tell that to your tribes in two months' time, when our winter stores run low, and another late season snowfall comes upon us?" he asked, his brows narrowing. Aigiarn averted her gaze to her gutal, her expression troubled. "Aigiarn, I believe Temu is the Negh. I believe in the legends of the dragons as much as you do. You know this," he said quietly. "But I also know that we must look beyond the lore to see the circumstances that are before us now. We cannot take such a risk, not when we have money in hand to prevent it. I am not asking for all of it. Only ten thousand. Ten thousand will keep us safe until the spring. Let me have ten thousand, and we can stop in Leucas, load the knarr with enough food to ensure our survival. Temuchin does not have to know. We will tell him we could only get twenty. What would be the difference? If it is meant to buy this golden falcon of the prophecies, surely it cannot cost us more than this ... not with your bartering skills."

He said this last as a gentle joke meant to draw a smile from her. Aigiarn did not smile, nor did she look up at him. Without enough food to feed all of their people, the harsh winter spent in the Khar foothills of northern Nuqut would surely decimate the Oirat tribes. Each year saw their numbers decrease, as many succumbed to the bitter temperatures and the scarcity of food. Toghrul was right; ten thousand dorotus would supplement their existing stores and guarantee a better chance for survival for many among them.

"I cannot lie to my son," she said.

"You are Khanum, Aigiarn," Toghrul said. "Leader of the Oirat. You cannot forfeit your people to spare Temu a lie." He took her by the hand, hooking her fingertips against his own and drawing her gaze. "Please."

She pulled her hand away, her brows furrowing as she reached into her bogcu, a heavy, hide pouch she

wore from her behen sash, next to the carved, bone hilt of her knife. She found the small sack of dorotus she had tucked within and pulled it out, loosening the draw cords as she balanced it against her palm. She counted out the money ... ten thousand dorotus ... and gave it to Toghrul.

"It is what is right, Aigiarn," he told her, closing his fingers about the coins.

"Do not tell Temu," she said.

* * * *

They arrived at the pier where they had fettered their knarr shortly after the sun had sunk beneath the horizon. Rain had blown in earlier in the morning, and the day had been spent beneath gloomy skies filled with low-lying clouds. The clouds had dispersed with the sunset, presenting the city of Capua with a magnificent and vibrant dusk. The evening's bright colors had yielded to dusky purples and indigos, and the first stars were beginning to glow overhead as Aigiarn, Toghrul and Nakhu walked down the pier toward their boat.

They had borrowed the knarr from their allies, the Uru'ut tribe, one of four remaining out of the Oirat peoples. Ten Uru'ut manned the ship and sailed with them for the long voyage south from Qoyina Bay in the Chagan Sea, through the straits of Garyelloch and south along the Torachan coastline. Toghrul had brought along twenty Ketel guards from his own tribe, the Kerait, along with Aigiarn, Temuchin and Yeb, the yeke shaman. The knarr was large enough in both length and girth to accommodate them comfortably; they were utilized by the Uru'ut as merchant vessels used to haul quantities of goods and livestock for trade with southern Lydian villages and tribes. The knarr's design had been borrowed by the Uru'ut from the Enghan, a neighboring seafaring race to the north; one mast with a square-rigged sail, a hull formed of overlapping oak planks attached to a pine frame, with a keel that rose gracefully and tapered sharply at both stem and stern.

It had seemed large to Aigiarn, but the knarr was dwarfed by the immense and hulking Torachan ships that were anchored throughout the broad, deep harbor. Enormous hulls floated in the bay, most with three masts stretching skyward and a dizzying tangle of lines and ropes suspended between all to hoist and lower their sails. It took crews of hundreds, not dozens to put one of the great ships into the wind and in motion; the entire Kerait tribe might have moved aboard one and lived spaciouly and comfortably for the rest of their days.

Everything with the Torachans must be extravagant and large, Aigiarn thought as she gazed out over the silhouettes of tall ships upon the water. Their empire, armies, ships ... even their clothing. Nothing is simple, functional ... or natural.

"Mamma!" Temuchin called when he caught sight of them along the pier. "Toghrul! Sain bainuu!"

"Sain bainuu, oyotona," Aigiarn called back to him in greeting, her hard expression softening into a smile for the first time all day.

They had drawn lengths of tanned hide over portions of the boat to shield its occupants from rain and wind. All of their party, the Uru'ut sailors and Keraites, stayed on the knarr, sleeping and eating aboard. They had been there for two days, but none grew restless by the wait. Temuchin and Yeb both said they needed to be there, and that was good enough to instill patience in the lot of them.

Temuchin ducked his head beneath the edge of a hide cover, and moved toward the middle of the ship. He looked up at Aigiarn as she stood above him on the dock, and smiled broadly, holding something up between his hands. "Look!" he exclaimed, wide-eyed and pleased. "Yeb took me to some of the

merchant shops today, Mamma, and look what he bought for me!"

Toghrul hopped nimbly down into the knarr, rocking it slightly in the water. He reached for Aigiarn, helping her clamber down.

"Bugu Yeb took you out into the city?" Aigiarn asked, frowning. *Bugu* was a title of respect for shamans; Aigiarn looked at Yeb now, and found him sitting by himself toward the far end of the boat, unmistakable among the other Oirat in the yellow, woolen shaman's vest, or khurim he wore lashed across his hips. His eyes were closed, his hands draped against his knees, as he engaged in his nightly habit of meditation.

She had told Yeb specifically that she wanted Temuchin to remain on the knarr. Capua was an enormous, crowded place with a sordid reputation that, to judge by the number of taverns and brothels she had passed that day, was well deserved.

"No, just to the shops along the wharf. It was not far. Jelmei and Khuchar went with us, two of the Kelets. It was fun. Yeb bought me some fried sweet cakes and this ... look, Mamma."

She took a small boat from her son's hand and held it toward the light of a torch set against a nearby piling for illumination. It was carved from a single block of wood, a little one-masted, toy ship.

"It is a knarr, like this one," Temuchin told her. "And look ... it came with these." He reached into his bogcu pouch and pulled out four miniature men, each carved out of wood. "Sailors, Mamma."

"This is very nice," Aigiarn remarked, prodding lightly with her fingertip against the tiny yard and linen scrap of sail. "It was very generous of bugu Yeb to buy this for you. Did you thank him?"

"Yes," Temuchin said. He grinned eagerly at Toghrul. "Toghrul, I asked if he would buy one for Belgutel, too, and he did. They float and everything. I thought we could race them in Nasan stream."

"That is a splendid idea and kind of bugu Yeb," Toghrul told him. He balanced the little knarr against his palm and made a show of admiring it. Belgutel was one of his sons, who had remained behind at the Kerait aysil in Nuqut. "I will repay him for the cost. Belgutel will be very pleased that you thought of him, Temu."

"Did you sell the gyrs?" Temuchin asked, as Toghrul pressed the toy boat against his hand.

"Did you eat supper, ko'un?" Toghrul asked, calling him *son*. Toghrul had helped to raise Temuchin; he and his two wives and children had accepted Aigiarn and Temuchin into their fold willingly and graciously when Yesugei had been murdered. Toghrul was the only father Temuchin had ever known, and he loved the boy as dearly as any of his own.

"Did you sell them?" Temuchin asked Aigiarn. "They are gone. You must have. Did you get thirty thousand for them?"

"Toghrul asked you a question, Temu." Aigiarn sat down upon a bench and offered murmured thanks as one of the Kelet gave her a wooden cup of qumis, fermented mare's milk.

"I asked one first," he replied pointedly, drawing a disapproving glance from her.

"Temuchin," she said.

"I ate some lentils," Temuchin said. "And some flatbread. Did you sell them?"

"Yes, Temu, we sold them," Toghrul replied. "But we were only able to get twenty thousand dorotus for them. We went to every falcon trader we could find, but that was the best we could do. No one would give us thirty."

Temuchin blinked at Aigiarn, looking bewildered and distraught. She struggled to smile for him. "Uch'lara, Temu," she said. *I am sorry.*

Temuchin's brows pinched slightly. "But we need thirty."

"Why, Temu?" Aigiarn asked. "Why do we need thirty thousand dorotus?"

"I do not know," he replied, still looking disconcerted. "I just know that we do ... and we will need them tonight. Twenty thousand will not be enough."

He turned and stepped over the bench, ducking his head long enough to retreat beneath the hide canopy. He had arranged a little nest for himself in here, blankets and skins on the floor where he would sleep, a few of the toys he liked the most that Aigiarn had let him bring along.

Aigiarn glanced at Toghrul, sparing him a dark glance and a frown before looking away, lowering her gaze into her cup of milk.

* * * *

She let Temu have some time alone beneath the canopy. He had come to an age when he liked to be by himself sometimes, with his own thoughts for counsel and company. He was still just a boy who liked to play with his friends and toys, but he was also approaching the threshold of manhood, and more and more lately, Aigiarn could see a great deal of Yesugei in him, his father's quiet, pensive nature.

After awhile, she crawled beneath the hide cover and found him lying on his side atop his pallet of blankets. He cradled his head in his hand, propped with his elbow against the floor of the boat, and played with his miniature knarr, arranging and rearranging the tiny wooden men inside its carved hull. His expression was morose, his lips pursed, his brow furrowed with a troubled cleft.

"I am sorry, oyotona," she said, stretching out to face him. He glanced at her, meeting her eyes in the shadows. "We tried our best."

"I know," he said. He returned his attention to the toy, making one of the little sailors hop overboard against a fold of burlagh hide.

"Maybe twenty thousand will be enough," she said. "Surely it will be, if all we are meant to do with it is buy the golden falcon." She did not mention that she and Toghrul had asked every vendor they could find about the bird, and none of them had ever heard of one, much less offered one for sale.

"I do not think that is why we need it," he said, making the fallen sailor wiggle back and forth, pretending that he swam. He had positioned one of his bokus, a small, round pouch made of hide panels stitched together and stuffed with crumbled pine needles, near him. Normally, he might spend hours bouncing the boku against the top of his gutal, maneuvering the ball skillfully back and forth between his feet. Tonight, he had apparently decided it would serve as an island toward which the little wooden figure swam.

"Why do you think we need it, then?" she asked, drawing his gaze again.

"I do not know," he said. "I would tell you if I did. I just saw that in my head. Thirty-thousand dorotus. Why would I see that ... feel that ... if you could not get it?"

"I do not know."

"It does not make sense." He stopped playing, and cupped his palm over the boku, rolling it absently beneath his hand. "I do not understand. Yeb always knows what his visions mean."

"Bugu Yeb has had a lot more experience with his visions," Aigiarn told him pointedly. She reached out and stroked her hand against his dark hair. "You will learn, as he had to. These things take time, that is all."

"I keep thinking about that man," he said, ducking away from her fingers. This was another relatively new thing with Temu; he was getting to an age where he did not always appreciate affectionate gestures from her. He wanted his own sleeping space in their ger at the aysil, instead of curled next to her on a broad pallet, as they had always done. Most nights, he still awoke and crawled over beside her, but that habit would probably fade, too, as he grew older. He was finding himself, learning a little more each day about the man he was becoming, and the realization of this made Aigiarn both pleased for him and sad for herself.

"The man with the golden hair and funny ears," Temu said. "The one I dreamed of on a giant ship ... like the Torachan ships here. His name is fahv-coon, Riden Fahvcoon; he said it means *falcon* in a language called Gailjin. I think he is the one we are supposed to find, the one the money is for." He looked at Aigiarn. "Maybe he can read the map."

Years ago, before Temu had been born, his father Yesugei had sent out a large scouting party into the Khar Mountains. According to Ulusian legends, it was beneath these massive, towering peaks that the dragons' lair could be found. The golden dragon, lord of his race, Ag'iamon had promised Yesugei's forefather, Dobun that the location of the lair would be revealed to only one, a member of the race of бага'han, the Abhacan. The Abhacan had lived in what was now called Lydia and portions of northern Torach, an ancient and long-extinct realm called Tirgeimhreadh. The Abhacan had been driven into extinction by menfolk tribes from the south eons ago. They had taken with them any knowledge they might have possessed of the dragons' lair.

Only one of Yesugei's scouting party had returned. It had been nearly a year since the group had embarked, and they had all long since been presumed dead and lost. The man who had returned had been Yeb's father, a shaman named Inalchuk, and when he had found the Oirat once more, he had been emaciated, nearly dead on his feet with thirst, hunger and exhaustion, his mind broken and addled. He had spoken only gibberish; a language none of them had been able to understand.

Inalchuk had scrawled out a map that Yesugei had believed showed the path to the lair, but the shaman had not marked any course on the map itself. He had scribbled in the margins of the parchment page, countless words and lines that likely described the way, but he had written his directions only in this unfamiliar language. To Yesugei's dismay, the map had proven nearly worthless without the ability to read the language. Though they knew where in the vast mountain region of the Khar the map seemed to indicate, the circumference of the area depicted was hundreds upon hundreds of square miles. A man could waste forty lifetimes wandering through the river clefts and mountain peaks in the map and never stumble upon even a hint of the lair.

They might have dismissed the entire matter as the ramblings of a lunatic had the shaman not brought with him from the Khar seeming evidence that he had at least stood upon the sealed threshold of the

dragons' lair. He had carried with him a scrap of broken stone, a square of ancient granite with characters carved deeply into its surface. Ag'iamon had told Dobun that the Abhacan would mark the entrance to the lair well so that the Negh ... the lord of men and dragons ... would know it when he came to it. The characters matched those printed on the map, and Yesugei had seized upon this as proof of the lair's discovery.

"If Ag'iamon told none but one of the baga'han, then this must be their writing system, their runes and language," he had said. "Inalchuk must have channeled the spirit of the baga'han who hid the lair, used him as a guide to lead them to it."

Yesugei had hoped that other shamans might free Inalchuk from the grasp of the spirit, that Inalchuk would be able to translate the carvings in the wood, the inscriptions on the map. Unfortunately, Inalchuk had died before even the strongest of shamans had been able to help him, and he had left them alone with this enigmatic and troublesome clue.

Yesugei had fashioned a metal frame to fit the cross section of stone; this he had affixed as a lid to a small iron box. The map was kept inside the box in the hopes that one day they would be able to read it. Yeb had taken the box and map with them when he, Aigiarn and Temu had fled the Khahl massacre of their tribe following Yesugei's murder.

Aigiarn had packed the box among her things for their journey. Temuchin had asked her to; as with the gyrs and the thirty thousand dorotus, it had been something he could not explain, but seemed to think was important nonetheless.

"Maybe this man can read it, yes," she said, though in her heart, she did not believe it. The Abhacan were gone, their civilization eradicated by Torachans, and there was no way anyone could remain who spoke or read their language. "Maybe we are meant to pay him to read it for us."

"I do not know," Temu said, his shoulders slumping somewhat. He sighed. "If he is the golden falcon all the stories tell of, why did Ag'iamon not just tell Dobun a man from the west would come?"

"Maybe Ag'iamon wanted to keep the Khahl from knowing about him," Aigiarn said. "Maybe he was trying to keep you safe from them, Temu."

Temuchin glanced down at the ongon around his neck, the small hide pouch that housed his father's ashes, and harbored his suld spirit. "I wish I understood what it all meant," he said. "I wish I knew what Father meant for me to do."

Aigiarn smiled at him, tucking her fingertips beneath the shelf of his chin and drawing his gaze. "You will, Temu," she said. "Do not worry."

* * * *

When she emerged from beneath the canopy, leaving Temuchin alone to his thoughts and toys, she saw that Yeb had finished his meditation. He sat with his back to her on one of the benches, engaged in soft conversation with Toghrul, who sat across from him. Aigiarn settled herself on the bench beside the shaman.

"I asked you not to take Temu off of the boat," she said in a low voice, so that the boy would not overhear.

"Yes, you did," Yeb replied, nodding once. He was eating a strip of dried, salted burlagh, chewing

thoughtfully.

"You took him anyway," Aigiarn said.

Yeb nodded again. "Yes, I did."

"You should not have. It is too dangerous here."

"Where is a place that is ever completely safe?" he asked in reply.

Aigiarn frowned. "Do not answer me in riddles, please. Why did you do that, Yeb?"

He glanced at her, his brow arched, the corner of his soft, bowed mouth lifting in a smile. "He has been on this boat for many long days," he said. "I thought he might enjoy a walk."

"He can walk just fine here," she said. "It is a big boat and a broad pier."

"It is a big city and a broad world, Aigiarn. And it is not my place ... or yours ... to keep him from it. We can only do our best to keep him safe within it."

She spared him a look. "Riddles and analogies. Must you always make one or the other?"

"Not always, no," Yeb said. "Though both have served me well on occasion."

He dropped her a wink, his smile broadening and she laughed despite herself. It was difficult to remain sore with Yeb for too long; she knew this all too well. He had been a childhood playmate and trusted friend to her husband, Yesugei and she had found a lot of comfort in his company over the years. Yeb's soft-spoken, thoughtful nature and wry sense of humor would inevitably charm her, even in her foulest of tempers.

"I have seen the ship," he told her, nibbling on his supper. "The one Temu dreamed about."

"What?" Toghrul asked, blinking in surprise.

"Ogotai showed it to you in a vision?" Aigiarn asked, equally startled.

"No, my eyes showed it to me out on the water," Yeb said, and he stretched his finger out, pointing out across the darkened harbor. "It came into the port late this afternoon. I went for a walk along the piers and asked the harbormaster about it. It is called *thea'Maorga*."

"How do you know it is the one?" Aigiarn asked, leaning forward on the bench, straining futilely to catch a glimpse of the ship.

Yeb looked at her. "The golden falcon will come from the west," he said. "There is nothing west of this harbor but the sea ... and a land called Tiralainn. That is where *thea'Maorga* has sailed from. It is the only ship out of the hundreds here that has come from the west. And the master told me the name, *a'Maorga* means *legant* in Gaelgen."

Aigiarn blinked again, startled anew.

The man on the ship, with the golden hair and the funny ears, Temuchin had told her. *The one I*

dreamed of ... his names is fahv-coon, Riden Fahvcoon; he said it means falcon in a language called Gailjin.

"Gaeilgen," she whispered.

I think he is the one we are supposed to find, the one the money is for.

"I have never heard of Tiralainn," Toghrul said. He glanced at Aigiarn. "Have you?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"I have not, either, but then again, my mind is not nearly as broad as the world," Yeb remarked. "We of the Oirat do not venture far from our own borders by habit. There is probably a good many places we have never heard or dreamed of before." He glanced between Aigiarn and Toghrul. "The ship was damaged in a storm. It was bound for Cneas, but strong winds blew them north to here to Capua for repairs."

"Just as the legends tell us," Toghrul said. "Keiden, sky spirit and lord of wind and weather has brought them here from the west ... delivered the golden falcon."

"So it would seem," Yeb said.

"Maybe that is why none of the traders here have ever heard of such a bird," Toghrul said. "Ag'iamon told Dobun it would be a breed unfamiliar to us. It must be a sort they only have in Tiralainn, one they have brought with them aboard their ship."

"I do not believe the falcon is the reason we are here, Toghrul," Yeb said. "Not in the literal sense."

"Why else would your visions ... and Temu's ... have brought us here? This man named *falcon* Temu spoke of?" Toghrul frowned. "He cannot be of consequence to us. Surely, his appearance in Temu's dream was just a sign, Yeb ... a sign by which we might know the boat. Or maybe he owns a golden falcon. Maybe we are meant to buy it from him." He turned to Aigiarn. "We should take the Kelet we have brought and go to the ship. We should not wait."

"I want to go with you," Temu said. He had emerged from beneath the hide canopy over the stem of the knarr, and stood behind Aigiarn and Yeb. They turned to him, and he regarded them, torchlight shimmering in his large, dark eyes.

"No, Temu," Aigiarn said, shaking her head. She rose to her feet. "Absolutely not. Toghrul is right—we must go to the ship, but you will stay here, where it is safe."

Temu blinked at her, visibly hurt. "But Mamma, you need me," he said. "Ogotai did not show Yeb the man, Riden Fahvcoon in his visions. I am the one who has seen him. Please, you need me to find him."

"A tall, fair man with long, blond hair and pointed ears," Aigiarn said. "I do not think he should be that difficult to find, oyotona."

Temuchin closed his hands, his brows drawing together. "I have seen his face. I know what he looks like. You need me," he insisted.

"We need you to be safe, Temuchin," Toghrul said, standing. "Your mother is right. The streets of

Capua are no place for a boy after dark. You will stay here aboard the knarr where it is safe."

Temu was angry and insulted; it was apparent in his face, the set of his brows, his stiffened stance. "You let me keep watch with the Kabtaut over the herd after dark," he said to Toghrul. "And go on the battue hunts—ride with the Hoyin'irgen in the gerkeh for the stag kills."

"This is different, Temu," Aigiarn said. "This is Capua, a city of Torachans and there are more dangers here than narsana or wolves."

"But Mamma—"

"Your mother and Toghrul are right. It would be unsafe for you to come with us," Yeb said, rising to his feet. He turned and stepped over the bench, approaching the boy. Temu looked up at the shaman, hurt, opening his mouth and drawing breath to object. Yeb stayed his voice by holding up his palm. "But you are right, as well, Temu, in that we need you. I need you, if we are to see this through."

He lowered his head and reached behind his neck for his ongon, drawing the loop of sinew over his head from beneath the length of his plaited hair. Temu blinked at him in startled confusion; Yeb never removed the ongon that harnessed his utha suld, Ogotai. He had worn the small leather pouch dangling near to his heart from the time he had been Temu's age, when Ogotai's spirit had first manifested itself to him.

"I would ask you to keep these ongons near, yours and mine, that our utha sulds might mingle and speak with one another," Yeb told him. He draped the ongon about Temuchin's neck. "Ogotai has not revealed to me all that Yesugei has shown you. I will need you to ask Yesugei to help us, to speak through Ogotai and guide me."

"How do I do that?" Temu asked, looking down at Ogotai's ongon, his eyes wide with fascination.

"You must be very still, and very quiet," Yeb said. "As I am, when I meditate. Let your mind grow aware only of Yesugei, his spirit's influence upon you. You must speak to your father and ask him to reveal the visions he has shown you to Ogotai, that together, we might understand their meaning." Temu turned his face up, meeting the shaman's gaze. "It is a very important task I would ask of you, Temuchin. Will you do this for me?"

"Of course, Yeb," Temu said.

Yeb lowered his head in polite deference. "Byarla, Temu," he said. *Thank you.*

While Toghrul called the Kelet guards to him, and they prepared to leave the knarr, Aigiarn caught Yeb by the sleeve and drew him aside. She was frowning, more puzzled than irritated, and he regarded her with kind eyes, his brows slightly raised.

"How did you do that?" she asked, glancing over his shoulder toward Temuchin, who still cradled the pair of ongons in his hands.

"Do what?" Yeb asked, and she looked at him, her frown deepening.

"I tell him no, and he gets angry. Toghrul tells him no; he gets even angrier. You tell him no and he concedes without argument. How did you do that?"

Yeb smiled. "I did not tell him he could not go," he replied. "I allowed him to choose for himself ... and I did not speak to him as a child in doing so."

"He is a child, Yeb," she said.

"He is old enough to understand that sometimes the greater good is not always served by selfish desires," Yeb said. "He will grow wise by such decisions ... if he is given the opportunity to make them."

Aigiarn scowled, and Yeb chuckled. "You can beat a rock with a scimitar for forty years, and have nothing to show for it but a dulled blade with chips in it for the effort," he said. "You can take this same rock and drip water upon it for forty years, and in the end, you will have hollowed a deep groove in the stone. Sometimes, Aigiarn, you have to be the water, not the sword."

Chapter Six

MEETING OF MINDS

Rhyden dreamed of Qynh again. He had retired to his stateroom, and while the master-at-arms posted himself in the corridor beyond the threshold, Rhyden had stretched out on his bunk. How his mind had ever grown still enough to succumb to sleep was beyond him; he had laid there for an eternity, it seemed, troubled by all that had happened. Aedhir had told him no harm would come to him, and the crew seemed to follow their Captain unerringly, but there was no telling what men would do when they were frightened and bewildered, as they were in the aftermath of the brutal storm. No matter what Aedhir said, Rhyden still felt he had some culpability; he was anguished to think that throwing the Shadow Stone into the sea had provoked its fury, stoked wind and water in its desperate, enraged attempt to return to its rightful bearer.

He had faded into slumber, his hands draped lightly against his stomach, his chin drooping toward his right shoulder. His breath had grown deep and measured and he had dreamed of Qynh, his Queen and love. He dreamed of making love to her, and though in his mind, Rhyden knew it was only a cruel illusion, in his heart—his desperate, lonely heart—he did not care.

She straddled him, moving against him, her hair spilling over her shoulders as she leaned over, kissing him. He could feel her, her mouth sweet against his, the curves and contours of her body warm and soft beneath his hands, her breath and voice real as he arched his back from the mattress to meet her, drawing a low, longing moan from her throat.

"Come back to Tiralainn, Rhyden," she said, her cheeks flushed, her hair clinging in damp tendrils to her brow. "Come back to me. I love you."

She kissed him again and his reason abandoned him. He sat up, tangling his hands in her hair, feeling her legs draw about his waist. He leaned her back, and her hair tumbled about the coverlets beneath her in a dark spill of curls. He felt her hands slide beneath his arms, her fingers splayed, clutching at his back. She kept whispering to him, whimpering, "I love you," over and over as he kissed her throat, her shoulder, her breasts. Her breath quickened against his ear until she gasped sharply, her fingers hooking into his shoulders, her thighs tightening against his hips. Her pleasure drew his own and he cried out breathlessly, crumpling against her.

"This is not real," he whispered. He pushed himself back and looked down at her, spent and trembling.

"You are not real, Qynh ... this is not real."

She reached up and caressed his face with her hands, smiling. "It is real," she said. "I promise you it is. It is what is in our minds ... what we both want, Rhyden. What we both need."

"You are not here," he said. "You cannot be here. It is a dream."

"No," she said. "It is the sight, Rhyden, binding us ... your heart and mine ... bringing us together. Trejaeran gave it back to us, you and me, the two people he loved more than any other. You kept your promise. You burned the Book of Shadows and there is nothing left that can hurt us now; nothing to use the sight against us. Your mind is awakening ... as is mine."

She cradled his cheeks between her palms. "We are bound together, do you not see? You will never be alone again. I am with you, Rhyden. I will always be with you."

"The bastard stole my wife," Aedhir said, and Rhyden jerked, his eyes flown wide with start as he looked toward the foot of the bed. Aedhir stood there, his face weary and haggard, his eyes filled with sorrow. A heavy leather glove covered his left hand and forearm, and a golden falcon perched upon his wrist. The falcon gave its wings a quick flap and clucked its hooked beak at Rhyden, its yellow eyes aglow in the lamplight.

"Aedhir—!" Rhyden gasped. The realization of his longing for Qynh had always shamed him, but it had not been until Aedhir had told him that night of his own wife's infidelity, and the contempt he harbored even now for the man for whom she had left him, that Rhyden had felt the full, staggering weight of his own culpability. Rhyden realized what he and Qynh had just done was surely no less offensive in Aedhir's opinion, and he sat up abruptly, feeling Qynh's hands slip away from him. His face was burning with abashed color, and he stared at Aedhir, stricken. "Aedhir, please, I ... I..."

Aedhir regarded Rhyden plaintively and then turned his gaze to the falcon. "I even called him my friend once," he said. "Did you know? I welcomed him into my home, and he took my wife from me. I am broken for it; even now, it haunts me every day. The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds. I guess I have learned about his measure, then, have I not?"

"Rhyden?" Qynh asked. She lifted her head, puzzled. "What is it?"

Rhyden looked down at her, dismayed. Obviously, she could not see Aedhir, or hear him. If what she had told him was true; if they were not dreaming, and it was the sight drawing his mind to hers, then it also showed him things that she was not privy to, visions that were his alone to witness.

"Would you do that to someone, Rhyden?" Aedhir asked. "Could you—to someone you called a friend?"

"Please do not," Rhyden whispered. He drew away from Qynh, recoiling from her hands, her body. He shook his head as he scuttled back on the cot, shoving his shoulders against the wall.

"What is wrong?" Qynh said, reaching for him. Her eyes were round and filled with worry. "Tell me, Rhyden."

"This is wrong," he whispered, hanging his head, feeling her fingertips brush against his hair.

"No," Qynh said to him, her voice gentle. "No, Rhyden, it is not."

"The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds," Aedhir said again. "His heart lay with my wife." The corner of his mouth hooked in a wry, humorless grin. "And the rest of him besides."

"Rhyden," Qynh said, frightened. "What is it? Please, tell me what is wrong. What have I done?"

He looked from her to the foot of the bed, and started again. Aedhir was gone; the falcon was gone. He and Qynh were alone in his chamber.

"We cannot do this," he said, aghast. "It is wrong, Qynh. In our minds or not, it is wrong. We cannot do this to Kierken. He is my friend. He is my king, Qynh. We cannot do this."

"I do not love Kierken anymore," Qynh said, reaching for him. "This is what I want—you are what I want."

"Do not say that," he said. "You cannot mean that, Qynh."

She touched his hand, slipping her fingers through his, and her eyes filled with sorrow. "For fifteen years, Lleuwyn Peildraigh drugged and raped me," she whispered. "For fifteen years, I languished in an afeem-induced stupor, and Kierken called this man ... this bastard monster his friend. Kierken abandoned me ... left me to that and I..."

"He thought you were mad," Rhyden said. "He thought your mind had broken with grief for Trejaeran, Qynh, and he was devastated. He could not have known. There was no way he could have..."

"You knew, Rhyden," she told him quietly. "You knew right away."

"I knew because my mother was a healer," he said. "I recognized the effects of the afeem upon you, but Lleuwyn ... he kept everyone from you who might have known—including me. Kierken could not have known. There was none who could have told him."

"No one should have had to," she said. "He should have known. He should have felt it in his heart. I was so alone ... for so long, Rhyden, and I found such comfort in your letters. My husband abandoned me, and he was within the very same walls that held me prisoner. You lived half the Bith away, and you were always near to me. Always with me."

"He loves you Qynh," Rhyden said. "You must believe that. More than anything, Kierken loves you."

"I cannot forgive him," she whispered, lowering her gaze as her tears spilled.

"You have not even tried," he told her. "We cannot do this. Please—Kierken is your husband. You must give him the chance to earn your love again, your trust."

"You have never had to earn it," she said.

He hung his head in shame. "It has never been mine to earn, Qynh."

He heard a knock against his door, loud and resounding. Qynh wept softly, her shoulders trembling. "Do not wake up, Rhyden," she whispered. "Please, stay here with me."

He leaned towards her, pressing his palm against her cheek. He could feel her tears against his fingertips,

and it broke his heart. "It is not real here, Qynh," he said. "Even if what you said is true, if Trejaeran gave us the sight back, it is all within our minds."

"Then come back to Tiralainn," she said. "Come back to me, Rhyden, please."

"I cannot, Qynh," he whispered, making her weep all the more. "I am sorry. You do not know how much I want to ... how much I love you..."

She tried to smile despite her tears. "Yes," she said, nodding her head and closing her eyes. "Yes, Rhyden, I do."

The knocking fell again, and Rhyden opened his eyes to find himself looking up at the ceiling of his stateroom. He was laying on his back in his bunk, fully clothed, his hands on his chest, just as he had been when he had dozed off. Qynh was gone; her fragrance, like gardenia blossoms in a delicate current of air waning from his nose, the warmth of her skin, her tears fading from his touch.

He sat up slowly, his mind still caught in the sleepy interim between resting and rousing. He tucked his long, disheveled hair behind his ears and swung his legs around, sitting on the side of the cot. "Come in," he said, his voice hoarse and weary.

The door opened and Thierley Feldwick, Aedhir's master-at-arms poked his large head inside. "Begging your pardon, my lord," he said politely. "But the Captain has asked me to inform you: we have arrived at Lunan Bay and are preparing to drop anchor."

Rhyden nodded, feeling groggy and disoriented. "What time is it, Mister Feldwick?"

Feldwick poked his thick forefingers beneath the flap of his uniform waistcoat, delving into the fob pocket of his breeches and finding his watch. He drew it out along the short length of his chatelaine chain and gave it a glance. "It is twenty-nine minutes past the seventh hour, my lord."

"Morning or evening?" Rhyden asked.

"Evening, sir," Feldwick replied with a quizzical glance that suggested he doubted one or the other ... Rhyden's coherence or sanity. "Captain Fainne will send for you when we are at anchor. He will be embarking by gig ashore to attend to the harbor duties, and thought you would like to accompany him. They have couriers, sir. He thought you might like to have word sent to Cneas."

And he probably thinks it is best to get me off of his ship as soon as possible, Rhyden thought. I cannot say that I blame him for that.

Rhyden had already written two correspondence to be sent to Cneas upon their arrival at Capua; the letters sat folded and sealed with wax upon a nearby writing table. He meant to send word to Calatin Nagealai, his ambassadorial assistant and Pymus Beith, his personal steward. Both were the closest, if not only friends Rhyden kept in Cneas; like Rhyden, Pymus was a Gaeilge Elf, and as such, a nearly constant companion for him. Calatin was from the Abhacan state of Tirurnua, which Rhyden jointly represented in Torach. The Abhacans were a diminutive but ingenuous race ... often derisively referred to as "Dwarves" ... who had once held a mighty empire in the Morthir. The city of Capua was located in part of what had once been this Abhacan kingdom, called Tirgeimhreadh. Five thousand years ago, the Abhacan had been forced from their homeland by migratory menfolk; a scarce few had escaped and colonized across the Muir Fuar sea in Tiralainn. As alone and isolated as Rhyden felt in Cneas, he had at least enjoyed a fellow Elf for company. Poor Calatin was the solitary Abhac in all of the Morthir, and

though it never seemed to bother him, Rhyden felt sorry for him nonetheless.

S'er y'raad thie, m'carrey, he had written to Calatin. *I am homeward bound, my friend*. He had written in the archaic Abhacan language of Chegney, knowing Calatin would likely smile at his humble effort and forgive him his trespasses, even though Chegney was seldom used and mostly forgotten, even among the Abhacans themselves. *S'ol lhiam er m'moalys ... I am sorry for my delay*.

Calatin and Pey were currently seeing to his responsibilities and social appointments in Cneas, respectively. There was no one else on the mainland Rhyden could think of who might have even remotely been concerned for his whereabouts over the last several months with such capable friends to serve in his stead. By now, they at least, were likely worried for him, and anxious for his return, and he wanted to reassure them that he yet drew breath and was on his way.

"Thank you, Mister Feldwick," Rhyden told the master-at-arms. He stood and glanced about the stateroom. He had not unpacked much during the voyage, and had mostly books and some haphazardly strewn items of clothing to stuff into his traveling case once more. "I might need a hand getting my trunk topside once we are at anchor, if you do not mind."

"Your trunk, my lord?" Feldwick asked, his curious tone drawing Rhyden's gaze.

"I would assume Captain Fainne means for me to arrange boarding at an inn in Capua tonight," Rhyden said. *If only to get me off his ship and out of his way*. When Fenwick continued looking at him, one bushy eyebrow lifted in puzzlement, Rhyden blinked. "Does he not?"

"He made no mention of that to me, sir," the master-at-arms replied. He shrugged. "Though I suppose if you wanted to, he could not very well stop you, could he?"

"I think it would be for the best if I left," Rhyden said.

Feldwick shrugged again. "Given the circumstances aboard of late, you might think that, yes, sir. Though, with Capua, it is fairly well choosing between a rock and the grave," he remarked.

"I beg your pardon?" Rhyden asked.

"Have you ever been to Capua, Lord Fabhcun?"

"No," Rhyden admitted. "But I have heard about it. It has a bit of a seedy reputation."

"It is a gathering hole for every sort of lowlife you might imagine, my lord ... pickpockets, thieves, bounty hunters, pirates, murderers, whores, drunks. Nice enough to visit, I suppose, but not the sort of place one might find a comfortable bed at a welcoming inn."

Rhyden raised his brow. "I have the idea I am not especially welcome here aboard, either."

Feldwick shrugged again. "Like I said, sir ... a rock and the grave." He nodded his chin toward Rhyden's trunk. "You let me know what you decide, my lord, and I will tend to that for you," he said, as he ducked out into the corridor, closing the door behind him.

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Aedhir would hear none of Rhyden's plan to find an inn in the city. "Absolutely not," he said, as they sat in the gig, watching the starboard side of the hull rise past them. The small boat was lowered by davits

into the harbor; five pairs of sailors surrounded them, oars in hand to steer them towards the Capuan piers. "I would as soon turn a rabbit loose in a room full of half-starved coy-dogs."

He had pulled a brass toitin case from an inner pocket of his great coat and offered one to Rhyden before taking one himself. Aedhir canted his head so that the broad, woolen brim of his tricorne hat sheltered the toitin from the wind and struck flints to light it. "Capua is no place for anyone to be on their own, much less a visiting nobleman," he said, leaning forward as Rhyden cupped his hands about his, shielding the flints as Aedhir lighted Rhyden's toitin.

"I told the men I would prefer them stay aboard," Aedhir said, speaking with the toitin thrust at a jaunty angle from between his lips. "Some of them want to go out anyway, have their fun, but they are under orders ... everyone in pairs, and no man on his own. Bad things can happen to a lone man in this city. I have been here too many times not to have heard tell of such things. There is some safety at least ... and better than none ... in numbers."

Aedhir carried an an'daga in a leather holster against his hip, hidden beneath his coats and the flap of his waistcoat. The an'daga, a single-shot, muzzle-loading pistol was a relatively new invention the Abhacan had introduced in Tiralainn. They were unavailable to most citizens ... and unheard of in the Morthir ...

but Kierken had been so impressed with the weapons that he had ordered one for each of the commissioned and warrant officers in his Crown Navy, along with longer-muzzled, one-shot rifles called isneachan. The guns belonging to thea'*Maorga's* officers were kept locked in strongboxes aboard the frigate; only the master-at-arms, Thierley Feldwick and Aedhir had keys to the cases, and Aedhir had brought one of the pistols with him ashore. "Just in case," he had told Rhyden with a sly wink, patting the inconspicuous lump of the an'daga holster beneath his great coat.

"What sort of things?" Rhyden asked. He had heard tales of Capua, but nothing he had ever lent much credence to; the city's debauchery was legendary throughout Torach, to the point of absurdity.

"Pirates like this port," Aedhir said. "They make a living raiding trade vessels. They sell a lot of their bounties here in Capua, and buy a lot of their crews here, too."

"Buy their crews?" Rhyden arched his brow.

Aedhir nodded his chin toward the Capua skyline, pinpoints of lamplight and distant fires along the piers.

He huffed a long stream of smoke from his nose. "The flesh trade capital of the Bith, they call it," he remarked, his mouth turning in a slight frown. "Concubines, whores, slaves, laborers, ship crews ... you name it, Rhyden, and they sell it in Capua. It is perfectly legal in the Torachan empire."

Rhyden nodded, inhaling deeply on his toitin and letting the smoke waft slowly from a part between his lips. The practice of slavery in the Morthir was one that had long troubled him. It was illegal in Tiralainn, though the larger, more disreputable cities such as Paldorahn and Mengeira still boasted plenty of underground flesh auction houses and brothels. In Cneas, the capital of the Torachan empire, slaves were imported from throughout the neighboring states, from as far east as Galjin and Teutoni and many of its most affluent noblemen boasted as many as one hundred and fifty slaves apiece within their households.

"Why hire a full crew when you can pay a flat price and work them without thought or regard?" Aedhir said, looking as disturbed by the idea as Rhyden felt. "It is an enormous and profitable industry.

Venalicium ... flesh traders ... have even been known to abduct people off the streets and sell them at auctions, usually to end up working for pirate crews. They have a word for that here in Capua ...*raptio*."

"Raptio," Rhyden said, repeating the unfamiliar Torachan term.

Aedhir nodded his head. "People who disappear from Capua are usually visiting sailors from other vessels not worth the missing," he said. "The pirates count on that ... their experience, and their relative lack of worth to others. A man alone is as good as taken by the venalicium. That is why I send them out in pairs, at the least." He glanced at Rhyden, arching his brow. "And why you are staying on the ship tonight."

"Between a rock and the grave," Rhyden muttered, shaking his head and smirking.

Aedhir grinned. "There are worse places I could have brought you," he said, making Rhyden laugh. "Consider this the scenic tour to Cneas."

"Fair enough," Rhyden replied, laughing again.

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The harbormaster wanted to see Aedhir's dispatch orders from the Crown of Tiralainn. He did not buy Aedhir's charming and clever attempts to dance around the subject, and refused to accept their port fares or issue them an anchorage permit without reviewing the necessary, official paperwork.

"The empire has grown firm," he told Aedhir. "No harboring without orders. Pirates like these waters. I have Torachan armada vessels floating in right regularly just to make sure they are not about. They are rather particular that I have all my documents in order with my fares, otherwise it comes back 'round on my neck, you understand."

"My orders dispatch my ship and crew to Cneas," Aedhir said, offering a broad smile. "We are here only to seek repairs to our ship. Our papers would make no difference."

"Be that as it may, Captain, and begging your pardon, sir, but I still need to review your orders," the harbormaster replied.

Aedhir's brows narrowed, his patience and good humor wearing thin. He had been going around and about with the harbormaster for the better part of the last fifteen minutes while Rhyden stood nearby, arranging for courier falcons to send some correspondences south to Cneas.

"Mister ... Halgart, did you say?" Aedhir asked, struggling to force a note of pleasantry into his voice. "I am a commissioned Captain in the Crown Navy of the kingdom of Tiralainn, not a pirate."

"So you keep pointing out," the harbormaster, Halgart said, nodding once.

"I do not sail without official order from my King," Aedhir told him.

"Yes, you have mentioned this, as well," Halgart said.

"Then let me mention this, you bloody rotted..." Aedhir began hotly.

"Captain Aedhir and his crew set sail upon my commission, sir, not written Crown order," Rhyden interjected, walking toward them. Aedhir blinked at him, startled. As an Elf, it went against Rhyden's nature to lie, and Aedhir knew it. He watched in surprise as Rhyden reached beneath the lapels of his great- and justicoats, withdrawing his ambassadorial identification documents. He presented them to the harbormaster, who took them in hand, fishing a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles from his pocket to review them.

"You are a Crown ambassador to the Empire, sir?" Halgart asked with a glance at Rhyden.

"I am, yes, sir," Rhyden replied with a nod.

"Representing Tiralainn and ... Tirurnua?" The harbormaster frowned at this unfamiliar name.

"The independent Abhacan state, yes, sir." Rhyden nodded again.

"Abhacan? You mean..." Halgart held his hand out parallel to the floor at hip-level, as though indicating the height of a diminutive form. "...Dwarves?" He offered a sharp bark of laughter. "I did not think there were any Dwarves left in the bloody wide Bith."

"Quite a few, in fact," Rhyden said mildly, not wasting the breath to correct the man's insulting reference toward the Abhacan race.

"They used to live all over the place 'round here, you know, couple hundred years or so ago."

"Five thousand years ago," Rhyden corrected. "The realm of Tirgeimhreadh, yes."

"And you represent them in Cneas?" Halgart spared a long glance at Rhyden, taking into consideration Rhyden's height with an amused expression on his face. "You do not look like a Dwarf, sir."

"I am not an Abhac," Rhyden said, his brows drawing slightly, tired of this little game. "I am a Gaeilge Elf. My name is Lord Rhyden Fabhcun, and as Ambassador, I have the authority to commission Crown vessels without writ from the King, as those documents will attest. Captain Aedhir graciously agreed to embark six weeks early from an ordered voyage to see me to Cneas once more from Tiralainn. I will be staying aboard the *Maorga* until arrangements can be made, another ship hired to bring me south. If any Imperial fleet officers arrive and inquire, I would be happy to explain our circumstances to them."

Rhyden's handsome features were angular and austere by nature; when he grew irritated, even the slightest draw of his brows lent his entire countenance a very stern and imposing cast. The harbormaster did not miss this, and he offered Rhyden's papers back to him, his expression appropriately rebuked. "Of ... of course, my lord," he stammered. "My apologies, my lord, for the inconvenience to you. Captain Fainne might have simply told me that from the first."

He pulled out a slim sheaf of parchment sheets from a nearby drawer and gave them to Aedhir; harbor permit documents. Aedhir began to complete the forms, affixing his mark where appropriate. He glanced over his shoulder at Rhyden as he leaned over the countertop, plume in hand. His eyes were wide and impressed, the corner of his mouth lifted in a delighted grin. Rhyden dropped him a swift wink, making him nearly laugh out loud.

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While Aedhir took care of the harbor permits, Rhyden stepped outside onto the boardwalk to smoke a toitin. He stood near the doorway, still within Aedhir's line of sight from the cramped office behind him, and drew the heavy wool flaps of his great coat together about his throat against the cold night air. The boardwalk was crowded with people; seamen and visitors passing along the piers, heading out for a night among Capua's numerous taverns and brothels, prostitutes trolling for clients among their ranks. Rhyden struck flints to the tip of his toitin, turning toward the harbormaster's building and using his shoulders to offer shelter to the sparks from the breeze. He drew in upon the toitin and turned once more, gazing out upon the piers and the harbor beyond.

"Have you another I might beg of you, sir?" asked a quiet voice from his right, and Rhyden started, looking over his shoulder. He found a man standing behind him; he might have been quietly there all along without Rhyden's notice, because the shadows draping down on the boardwalk planks from beneath the eaves of the office were heavy and thick. The man wore a mustard-colored wool vest that fell to below his hips, fastened with a broad, maroon sash around his waist, covering a long, fur-trimmed robe. He wore a cap with a thick fur cuff turned back from his brow, and his black hair hung down the length of his back in an intricate plait from beneath the hat. Even in the shadows, Rhyden could see that he was foreign to Capua; his eyes were slightly tilted and narrow, his cheeks high, his features softly sculpted. His appearance, his clothing seemed vaguely familiar to Rhyden.

"Your rolled herbs, sir," the man said. "Have you another?" His voice was low in timbre, his accent delicate and deliberate, nearly prim in its diction and annunciation. There was a soothing, nearly mesmerizing quality to the sound, as though he reached out with his words, like gentle, stroking fingertips. It was the sort of voice one drew comfort from when sick or injured, a voice that imparted kindness in its cadence and resonance.

"Uh ... yes," Rhyden said. He reached into his pocket and produced the toitin case, offering it to the man. "Yes, of course."

The man seemed puzzled by the simple latching mechanism on the case. Rhyden had to tuck his toitin between his lips and reach out, pressing the lever that popped the lid open on the box. "Thank you," the man told him, smiling, unembarrassed by Rhyden's proffered assistance.

"You are welcome," Rhyden said, watching the man with curious fascination as he took a rolled toitin from the case. The man's clothes were a functional but somewhat primitive style Rhyden did not recognize in its origin. The simple lines and fabric of the outfit were adorned with rather exquisite hand-embroidering along the hems and trimming. Tiny, carved wooden beads had been sewn into the patterns, stitched beneath the fur cuffs at the collar and sleeves.

Rhyden tucked the toitin case into his pocket once more and took his flints in hand to offer the man a light. The man drew his toitin against his nose, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply, drawing the fragrance of the aromatic herbs into his lungs.

"Minstrel's herb," he said, opening his eyes and looking at Rhyden. "And bahlrot root."

"Yes," Rhyden nodded, surprised and impressed by his accurate deduction. "It is a mild blend."

"But flavorful," the man remarked. He let Rhyden lean forward, strike the flints and light the toitin for him. As Rhyden moved away, the man brushed his fingertips against his long sheaf of blond hair, drawing it aside long enough to glean a peek at Rhyden's tapered ear.

"You are not from Capua," he observed.

"No," Rhyden said, shaking his head, stepping away from the man. He was unnerved by the most innocent, glancing of touches from strangers by nature; the man's fleeting contact bothered him even more so than was usual. He had touched Rhyden's hair, looking at his ear as though he had expected to find the Elfin point beneath, and was unsurprised by the discovery. "You are not, either."

The man smiled at him. "I am not, no," he said. "I am from the east, Ulus."

"I am from Tiralainn, to the west," Rhyden said.

"Across the sea?" the man asked, and Rhyden nodded. The man inhaled deeply on the toitin and canted his chin toward the sky, breathing out a broad stream of smoke. "You are very kind to have shared," he said, giving the toitin a small, demonstrative wiggle. "I have never seen a form of pipe weed rolled in paper like this. It is quite pleasant."

"It is called a toitin," Rhyden said.

"A toitin," the man repeated carefully, as though the Gaeilgen word was something very important in the utterance, something he strived diligently to pronounce correctly. Rhyden nodded, and the man smiled again. "May I ask another kindness of you, sir?"

He probably wanted money, Rhyden realized. He and Aedhir had been approached by no less than a dozen panhandlers since arriving at the wharf, and every last one of them had employed a new gimmick or ploy to pry coins from them. "I suppose," he said.

The man reached into a leather pouch that dangled from his sash against his hip; a peculiar gesture for someone begging for alms, and Rhyden's curiosity roused again. The man pulled out a carefully folded sheet of parchment from the sack and unfolded the page between his hands.

"Can you read this for me?" he asked Rhyden, offering the sheet to him.

Rhyden looked at him warily, wondering what sort of trick he was playing. After a long moment, he pinched the page between his fingertips and drew it away from the man. He stepped back toward the threshold of the harbormaster's office, where lamplight spilled out onto the boardwalk in a dim swath. He held the page toward the light, and dropped his toitin in surprise. It was a rubbing; someone had pressed the thin sheet of parchment against a carved object—stone to judge by the imprint of the grain left against the page—and transferred whatever writing was etched upon it onto the paper by rubbing lightly with charcoal. He recognized the characters, the runes transcribed, and glanced at the man.

"This is Chegney," Rhyden said. "The Abhacan language. Where did you get this?"

"It is a rubbing of something my father found many, many long years ago," the man said. "A piece of stone, a fragment of some larger carving." He gestured with his hands, indicating size. "He could not read it, and neither can I. I wondered what it meant. You said you serve the Abhacan, that they yet live in Tiralainn, and I thought surely this meant you might be able to read the inscription."

When he noticed this comment seemed to surprise and disconcert Rhyden, the man offered a friendly, reassuring smile. "I overheard you inside. My son has gone to retrieve our papers from our boat. I am waiting for him here."

Rhyden looked at the parchment again. His suspicious expression softened with wonder, and his brows lifted as he admired the page, his breath drawing nearly still. "Where did your father find this plank of wood?" he asked.

"He never told me," the man said, and Rhyden glanced at him, disappointed. "Somewhere in the Khar mountains. He could not remember exactly where by the time he returned home."

"That is a shame," Rhyden murmured, his gaze traveling to the parchment again. "This writing is ancient. Chegney had fourteen variations in rune formations, for the fourteen principle dynasties of Tirgeimhreadh.

They do not even remember them all—they scarcely use the fourteenth dialect anymore, even in Tirumua."

He studied the charcoal rubbing, completely awestruck. "This is the eighth dynasty, at least, right before the migration across the Muir Fuar, when they abandoned Tirgeimhreadh to the menfolk. This is only part of a larger inscription, I think. There are rune scrips here on the edges—more characters. These..." He tapped his fingertips lightly against the parchment. "They are transitory runes, characters left from at least the fourth dynastic alphabet, I think. It looks like a variant of *hed*, the Chegney word *forgo*, I think, or *pass*. I think it says, *t'eh hed*, or 'he shall pass.'"

He looked up at the man. "Was the stone part of a door?" he asked. "A barrier of some sort? Something sealed or locked?"

"I do not know," the man said. He was smiling at Rhyden, a slight upturn of the corner of his mouth, like a teacher observing an especially astute pupil. "Why would you ask?"

Rhyden stepped toward the man, forgetting caution in his excitement. He held the parchment out so that the man could look over his arm and see it. "Do you see how the runes seem to arc?" he asked, the tip of his forefinger following the lines of letters across the page. "They are not written in a straight line, even with one another. And there are markings here along the bottom ... hoah, I wish we had better light and a bloody lens to peer through. I think these are part of a larger rune inscription. A seal."

He glanced at the man. "The ancient Abhacan believed in obbeys ... magic," he said. "By the eighth dynasty, they had a powerful totem they used to bind or seal places that were sacred to them. It was a large seal; it would have covered a door, very broad, circular in shape." Rhyden gestured with his hands. "The seal of the Seven Ancient Abhacan Kings. It meant whatever lay beyond the marked threshold was very special."

Or very dangerous, he thought. He had only ever seen the mark of the Seven Ancients once in his entire life, because no other inscriptions of it were believed to exist. The ancient Abhacan who had first migrated to Tiralainn had attempted to use the seal to trap the spirit of Ciardha, the Na'Siogai, beneath the realm's northernmost Barren mountains. The seal had been carved and inlaid with gold upon a pair of immense black granite doors that had blocked the entrance to Ciardha's subterranean prison. The doors, with the magnificent and enormous engraved seal were now on display at the royal museum in Iarnrod, the capital city of the Tirumua.

"I think these words, *t'eh hed* ... he shall pass ... are part of a seal inscription, maybe a variant of the Seven Ancients," Rhyden said. "It is definitely a talismanic mark, though. The letters arc, and the circle was a powerful symbol in Abhacan obbeys rituals." He smiled broadly, astounded. "This is marvelous. So much was lost to them in the migration. They have so little of their race, their culture from Tirgeimhreadh preserved. This would be precious to them."

He turned to the man, his eyes round and hopeful. "Do you have this with you?" he asked, flapping the parchment. "The piece of stone this came from?"

"It is aboard my ship, yes," the man said, smiling as he nodded once. "Would you like to come and see it?"

"See it? I would like to buy it from you, sir," Rhyden said.

"You are not buying anything from him, Rhyden," Aedhir said, and his hand darted between them,

snatching the parchment from Rhyden's fingers. Rhyden turned, startled, his eyes flown wide.

"Aedhir, what are you...?" he began.

Aedhir was staring at the man, his brows furrowed, his mouth turned in a frown. "He is a street hustler and a swindler," he said to Rhyden without averting his gaze. He thrust the parchment at the man, shoving it between his hands. "And he has nothing you want to buy."

"Aedhir, no," Rhyden said. The man looked between them, his expression passive and unoffended. "This is a charcoal rubbing of some sort of Abhacan artifact, in a version of Chegney that has not been spoken for millennia. It is extraordinary, and I..."

"Yes, and I am certain he has ancient rubbings from all sorts of artifacts, every culture and tribe in the entire bloody damn empire tucked away in his little pouch there," Aedhir said. "Even the Fathacan giants of old Tirmor, am I right, friend?" He used the word "friend" snidely, his frown deepening. "You are Oirat, are you not? From Ulu."

"Yes, I am," the man replied, nodding.

"I might have known," Aedhir scoffed. He looked at Rhyden. "It is a trick, a bloody ruse to con you out of your money." He hooked his hand against Rhyden's elbow and began to lead him away. "Come on. Let us go."

"Aedhir, please," Rhyden said, shrugging his arm loose. He turned to the man, and found him smiling again, softly, kindly.

"You may keep it," the man said, offering the parchment to Rhyden.

"I will pay you for it," Rhyden said, taking the sheet in hand. He reached beneath his coat for his coin purse and Aedhir caught him again by the arm.

"No, you will not," Aedhir said, and Rhyden blinked at him, bewildered and somewhat irritated. Aedhir's face softened, and his brows raised. "Trust me, Rhyden," he said quietly. "I am your friend. Take the paper if you want it, but let us go."

He stared at Rhyden, his gaze imploring, and Rhyden relented. "Alright."

"Come on," Aedhir said, leading him away. The Captain spared one last glower over his shoulder toward the man and then turned away, leaving him behind them.

* * * *

"He was an Oirat," Aedhir told Rhyden. They had gone together to a pub near the waterfront and sat at the crowded, smoke-filled bar, shouting at one another over the din of boisterous conversation and drunken song. They each nursed pints of thick portar capped with crowns of creamy foam. Rhyden had been studying the charcoal rubbing, his expression somewhat forlorn, and Aedhir reached over, folding the parchment in half along its crease.

"From Ulu," Aedhir said. "A vagabond people called the Oirat. What he was doing so far south, I do not know, but it cannot be for anything good. They are a worthless race."

"The Uluans?" Rhyden asked. He had heard of Ulu; it was one of the twelve states of the Torachan

empire. Its mention seldom arose in any of his ambassadorial conversations or negotiations, but he knew the territory was considered somewhat important to the empire, because Torachan legions used it as an entry point into the northern Engjold region, a land the Torachans were determined to claim.

"There are no Ulusians, really," Aedhir said. "Even they do not want to be lumped in with the Oirat. Those are the southern tribes ... steppe nomads, barbarians. Those Ulusians in the north, the Khahl, now they are a better breed ... civilized and cultured, a little wealth beneath their belts. The Oirats are nothing but beggars and thieves. They scarp by on what they can pilfer from others. They refuse to acknowledge the Torachan empire and live like dogs out in the mountains and wilderlands. They are considered enemies to the empire, renegades. Torach has tried for years now to be rid of them, without much luck."

Rhyden considered pointing out that a portion of Aedhir's life, at least during the First Shadow War, had been spent in a similar existence. The Fiainas rebels had largely been considered vagabond thieves and beggars ... enemies to the Crown and renegades ... stealing to survive, scraping an existence out in the mountains and wilderlands of Tiralainn. He decided to hold his tongue, and took a long swallow of his portar instead.

Aedhir chuckled, drawing Rhyden's gaze. "What?" Rhyden asked.

"You have been away from the Morthir ... and around Elves again ... too long," Aedhir told him. "You have grown too trusting. Elves do not lie to you, but menfolk certainly do. He was lying to you, Rhyden. He spied us on our way to the harbormaster, and thought our clothes marked us for rich. He listened in on our conversations and gleaned enough to figure out what might pique your interest. It was a con."

"You cannot fake this," Rhyden said, opening the parchment. "Aedhir, this is the eighth dynasty variant of Chegney, with fourth dynastic transitory runes. Actual, historical examples of it do not exist ... only modern estimations of the rune development based on verbal descriptions from Abhacan scribes. Everything predating the ninth dynasty, when the Abhacan had settled in the Midland Mountains is fairly well lost. The only pre-ninth example of rune characterizations that they have are those etched upon the granite doors that sealed Ciardha beneath the Barrens."

"I do not know how they did it," Aedhir said, closing the parchment again. "But I know that they did. The Oirat creep all around the Khar mountains of Lydia ... what was once part of Tirgeimhreadh. I am sure they have found examples of writings and carvings from when the Abhacan lived there. Such things might have been preserved enough to duplicate and forge." He poked his elbow against Rhyden's arm and grinned at him. "You know what I think? I think you, my friend, need some brimague to help you forget that chicken-scratch rot."

Rhyden arched his brow, smiling. "You do owe me two-fingers' worth," he said, pointedly.

Aedhir laughed, clapping Rhyden's shoulder and motioning for the barkeep. "Put that damn paper in your pocket, Rhyden Fabhcun, and I shall buy you the whole bloody bottle."

* * * *

Yeb found Aigiarn precisely where he had left her and the others, along one of the piers near the harbormaster's office. Toghrul was in the process of haggling the price of a long boat ferry for them out to the frigate, thea'*Maorga*, and Aigiarn stood by herself, away from the Kelet guards, her brows set in their customary furrow.

"We will not need the boat," Yeb told her, closing his hand gently against her arm and making her jerk with surprise.

"Tengrilin boshig, Yeb!" she exclaimed, her eyes flying wide. *Tengri's will!* "Where have you been? I was worried. I thought something had happened to you!"

"We will not need the boat," Yeb said again. He leaned close to her ear, speaking quietly. "I have found him already."

"What?" Aigiarn said. "He is here, ashore?"

"Yes, Aigiarn," Yeb said, nodding once. "We must have only just missed his arrival. I spoke with him outside of the harbormaster's office."

"When, just now?" she said. She rose onto her tiptoes, looking all about, anxious and eager. "Where is he? Did you bring him with you? What did he say?"

"He said a great deal," Yeb said. "I did not bring him with me. He seemed nearly willing, but his friend did not approve. It does not matter. I know where they are going ... I followed them. I know where we can find him again." He smiled at her. "He is the falcon, Aigiarn ... the one who will lead us to the dragons' lair. I have felt this all along, but now I know for certain. He is the one."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because I showed him an ash rubbing of Yesugei's box," he said. Aigiarn's brows drew sharply at this, and she sucked in a swift breath to admonish him. He silenced her before she even uttered a single word. "He read it to me."

"What?" Aigiarn breathed, stunned.

"He read it to me. The *baga'han* yet exist across the sea in his land, Tiralainn, and he knows them, their histories ... their language, Aigiarn. He told me what it says. It is part of a larger inscription, an ancient, magical seal the *baga'han* used to mark sacred places. He called it the mark of the Seven Ancients. Seven, Aigiarn ... like the seven sacred stars Father Sky has placed upon Temuchin to mark him as the Negh."

"What does the inscription say?" Aigiarn asked, trembling all at once.

Yeb's smile broadened. "He said it reads, *he shall pass.* "

Aigiarn blinked at him, breathless. "He shall pass," she whispered.

"By the Mark of Seven, you shall know him," Yeb said softly, quoting the ancient promise of the dragon lord, Ag'iamon, offered millennia ago. "By this mark, he shall pass. By this mark, he shall command us, and by this Mark, we shall all rise again."

"Yesugei was right," Aigiarn said. She snatched hold of Yeb's del sleeve, her fingers tightening with sudden, bright excitement. "Inalchuk did find the dragons! The stone is a piece from the entrance to the lair! The map will lead us to it ... Yesugei was right!"

"The map will guide us along our path ... but it will not lead us there alone, Aigiarn," Yeb said quietly, drawing her gaze.

"No," she said, and smiled. "A falcon will." Her eyes traveled along the crowded piers and boardwalks, as she hoped to find even a fleeting glimpse of him, this golden-haired man named Rhyden Fabhcun whose name meant *falcon*, and who could read the baga'han language to guide them to the dragons ... and lead Temuchin to his destiny. "A golden falcon from the west will lead us."

Chapter Seven

AS GOOD A CAUSE FOR CELEBRATION AS ANY

Aedhir and Rhyden had not been gone from thea *Maorga* for more than an hour before a second longboat embarked for Capua from the ship. This boat carried Nimon Hodder and a dozen other crewman aboard, all willing enough to ignore the Captain's advice and head ashore.

Or stupid enough, Pryce thought, watching the light from the lantern hung at the longboat's stern grow smaller as they rowed away. *I wish I knew where Aedhir was. I would row ashore myself and warn him.*

"There goes a lot surely bound for trouble," he murmured with a frown, standing with Wen along the starboard forecandle railing. He was not supposed to be on his feet; his head still ached him, and the only reason he had ventured topside from his stateroom was because he knew Aedhir was not aboard to send him to bed again. He hated being penned within the claustrophobic confines of his room; even with the ship at anchor, Pryce loved the breeze off the cold ocean water against his face, the smell of the sea and the broad freedom provided by the expansive, open horizon.

He caught sight of more lanterns on the water; three longboats approaching them. He poked his elbow against Wen's arm and dropped him a wink, his stern expression fading, replaced by a wry smile. "And here comes some trouble of our own."

"Is it the Captain coming back?" Wen said, spying the boats as well.

"I do not think so, not just yet," Pryce said with a smile.

"What is it, then?" Wen asked, curious.

Pryce clapped him on the shoulder and grinned broadly. "That, Mister Poel, is as good a cause for celebration as any," he said. Wen blinked at him, bewildered, and Pryce laughed. "Women, Wen. They are boatloads of women."

The longboats carried twenty apiece, courtesans from several of Capua's most notorious and reputable brothels. Such was Aedhir's fond habit; even when he would not permit his crew ashore, he would send the shore to them. He would hire women to the ship, and send men into the hold to pull out kegs of ale and rum. In addition to each crew member's daily allotment of liquor, Aedhir stashed a private reserve for each of his voyages ... three barrels apiece of premium-quality drink. "Not that watered down and sorely lacking substitute the Navy gives to us," he was proud to declare.

Several crewmen had already broken out their assorted bodhran drums, fiddles and uilleann pipes and the deck was alight with blazing lanterns, bright with the cheery melodies of song.

"It is in poor taste," Odhran said, drawing Pryce's gaze. He sulked behind them, his brows furrowed, his

expression sullen as he stood with his arms folded across his broad chest.

"Odhran, hush," Wen said.

"It is in poor taste," Odhran said again. "Music and merriment, a bloody party on the main deck, as though none of this ever happened, and everything was fully right in the world."

"The crew needs a celebration, Odhran," Pryce said, turning around and leaning his hips against the balustrade. "Especially now. No one has forgotten the men we lost. They were our friends, Odhran. I sailed with most of them five years or more, knew them well and dearly. We need a reason to feel some joy again, some release, even for a little while."

Whatever answer Odhran was seeking, to judge by his dour expression, this was not it. Odhran did not seem to like Pryce, though Pryce was at a loss to explain why. No matter what he did, it seemed wrong in Odhran's regard; any advice or tutelage he offered misconstrued as criticism, any orders he issued arbitrary and unjust.

Odhran had come to him a short time earlier, drawing Pryce aside for private counsel along the taffrail of the stern. "Are you better, sir?" he had asked politely, fidgeting like a small child before a schoolmaster.

Pryce had managed a laugh, shrugging. "I do not think there is measure of my form that is not aching wretchedly," he admitted. "But I am out of my bed and standing upright on the deck, and there is a blessing, I think."

"Yes, sir," Odhran said with a nod. He was quiet for a long, awkward moment and then said, "Lieutenant Finamur, some of the crew are talking about taking shore leave tonight."

"Yes, I know," Pryce said. "Mister Hodder and some others."

Odhran had been occupying the line of his sight with the tips of his shoes, but he glanced up at Pryce, his expression hopeful and earnest. Pryce had felt his stomach tighten at that look, because he had realized what Odhran was going to ask of him ... and he anticipated the response his reply would prompt.

"I ... I was wondering, sir ... hoping really, that I might be able to join them," Odhran said. Before Pryce could even open his mouth, he added eagerly, "I know what Captain Fainne told us, sir, but there are twelve others going besides Nimon ... I mean Mister Hodder, and he told me he has been to Capua before ... lots of times, sir ... and knows his way around quite well. He said I would be welcome with them, and in safe and constant company. I would really like to see Capua, Lieutenant Finamur, and it would be nice to stretch my legs a bit on dry land for a change."

Aedhir might have abided seasoned sailors turned loose in Capua, but he would have hit the floor ... and throttled Pryce for good measure ... had he allowed one of the midshipmen to take such a risk.

"Odhran," Pryce said, his brows lifting sympathetically. "I know you are weary of the ship, but Capua is not a safe place for men in any numbers, really. Why do you think only twelve have chosen to go?"

Odhran had understood Pryce's intentions to refuse him, and had fumed, his lips pressed together in a thin line. "That being said, sir, I would still like to choose for myself and go," he said.

"Mister Hodder and his fellows are crewmen, under Suli and the Captain," Pryce said. "If the Captain leaves it to them, and Suli approves, they can go if they wish. You are a midshipman, Odhran ... a

commissioned officer of the Crown. You answer to Captain Fainne and your superiors ... no choices. I am First Officer, and I am sorry, but I am telling you no."

Pryce did not know what else he might have done to aggravate Odhran, or why being denied shore leave might have bothered him so, but it was obvious from Odhran's dark regard as they stood upon the forecastle and watched Hodder's party row ashore that he remained sore with Pryce.

"I think I shall retire below, if I may," Odhran said, meeting Pryce's gaze.

"Of course, Odhran," Pryce said, his expression troubled as he watched Odhran turn smartly on his heel and walk away from them. He glanced at Wen. "He does not like me much, does he?"

Wen shrugged, looking somewhat unhappily down at the water. "I do not think that is it, Lieutenant," he said after a moment.

"We are off the quarterdeck, Wen," Pryce reminded, drawing Wen's gaze and making him smile.

"Odhran is homesick, that is all, Pryce," Wen said. "This is all still new to him. And he has never done very well with people telling him what to do or not do. His parents always let him do fairly well as he pleased. You are his age, and it is strange to him, answering to you. I guess it has not occurred to him that you know a lot more about ships and the sea than he does, that you are not doing things to be unreasonable."

"Do you think I am unreasonable, Wen?"

Wen smiled again. "No, I think you know what you are doing."

Pryce laughed. "Sometimes, anyway," he said. "Or at least I fake it well."

Wen had spent much of the day in Pryce's stateroom, keeping him company. They had talked about their lives, childhoods, politics, favored authors and poets. Pryce had been surprised and pleased to discover he had quite a bit in common with Wen; they shared similar tastes and opinions on things, and compatible senses of humor. Pryce had enjoyed having Wen around; it made being bedridden and cooped below far more tolerable, pleasant even.

"Thank you, by the way," Wen had told him quietly, sitting in a chair by Pryce's bed, looking somewhat sheepishly down at his lap.

"For what?" Pryce had asked, propped nearly upright with a pile of pillows arranged behind his head and shoulders.

"You saved my life last night, Pryce," Wen said.

"Oh, that," Pryce said, with a soft laugh. He had reached out, patting his hand affably against Wen's sleeve. "I did not mind for it. You are my friend. If I did not like you so well, Wen, I would have let you splatter."

"Odhran and I have been friends for a long time, since we were both eight, I guess," Wen said on the forecastle, looking out over the harbor again. "It was really my idea to join the Crown Navy. I talked him into it ... badgered him really. He does not mean any harm, but this is different than what he is used to, what he expected, I think."

"Why is he suddenly so interested in keeping company with Nimon Hodder?" Pryce asked. Haely had mentioned to him earlier that he had noticed Odhran and Nimon speaking together in murmured conversation on several occasions throughout the day. For three weeks, Odhran had not shown much interest in befriending anyone aboard thea'*Maorga*, much less the lay crew, and all of a sudden, in the span of one afternoon, he and Hodder seemed fast fellows.

"Nimon Hodder?" Wen said, blinking in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"He asked me if he could go ashore with Hodder and his friends," Pryce said. He raised his brow. "He did not tell you about this?"

Wen frowned. "No, he did not."

"Haely told me they have been keeping counsel together all day long," Pryce said.

"That is odd," Wen said, his brows drawn slightly. "Nimon Hodder is a boor. He keeps trying to stir trouble against Rhyden Fabhcun. Do you know he has told the crew that Rhyden put a spell on Captain Fainne? Some sort of Elf magic to make him leave port in Tiralainn early?"

Pryce laughed. "That is ridiculous."

Wen nodded. "I think so, too," he said. "But Odhran believes it, and some of the crew does, too—especially after what happened last night. They think he brought the storm upon us."

Pryce's laughter faded, and his expression grew troubled.

"Odhran thinks Rhyden used magic to wake you up, to heal you," Wen said. "He heard Rhyden say that. Rhyden was making a joke—a bloody joke to Captain Fainne, because of everything Nimon Hodder has been telling people about magic, but with Odhran ... It is like he hears what he wants to, and forgets about common sense sometimes. It is all so daft. I tried to tell him."

Pryce looked out toward the lights of Capua, and the distant flicker of lantern light from Nimon Hodder's longboat. "I wish I had known of that sooner," he said. "I would have talked to Suli, kept them from leaving the ship tonight."

"Why?" Wen asked. A stricken expression crossed his face and his eyes widened. "Captain Fainne and Rhyden went ashore together. You do not think Hodder would try something, do you, Pryce?"

Pryce realized Wen's alarm and tried to smile. "If Lord Fabhcun had gone alone, I might not be so certain, but Captain Fainne is with him," he said. "They would not do anything against the Captain, no matter what Hodder might have convinced them of."

His tone was confident enough, his smile seeming genuine, but he was worried, too, and struggled not to frown. *Surely they would not be that stupid*, he thought, as his gaze wandered to the water again.

Would they?

* * * *

Odhran sat on his bunk in his stateroom, scowling. *Nimon is right. Pryce Finamur is a pontificating ass*, he thought.

"No one has forgotten the men we lost," Pryce had told him. "They were our friends, Odhran. I sailed with most of them five years or more, knew them well and dearly."

Like their bloody merits were measured by their acquaintance to you, Odhran thought. Arrogant bastard.

Everytime he thought about when he had approached the Lieutenant about going ashore with Nimon and the others, Odhran fumed. Pryce had listened to his implore—perfectly reasonable and sound in the presentation, Odhran thought—with that smug, pretentious look that seemed permanently plastered on his face, and Odhran had known what answer to expect before he had even finished asking.

"I am First Officer," Pryce had told him, in a conceited tone of voice that suggested Odhran needed constant reminding of his superior rank. "And I am sorry, but I am telling you no."

Odhran had left his stateroom after the storm the night before and found Nimon Hodder on the main deck, helping untangle the fallen rigging and sprint the damaged main mast. Odhran had approached the man, striking up a conversation. They had talked together for several hours as Odhran lent a hand with the deck work, mostly about the matter of Rhyden Fabhcun.

Nimon had listened with a great deal of interest as Odhran had told him about the parallels he had noticed between the tornadoes striking Belgaeran and the storm that had ravaged their ship, and the presence of Rhyden Fabhcun in both circumstances. Odhran had told him of what had transpired earlier in Pryce's chamber, when Rhyden had told Aedhir he meant to use draiocht—Elf magic—to rouse the unconscious lieutenant. He had shared what Wen had told him, that Rhyden might be sailing with them for Tiralainn once more and Nimon had frowned, his brows furrowing deeply.

"The bloody duchan he will," he said. "We are not sailing any further with that damned, bewitching Elf. I will bloody well see to that."

Nimon had sought him out again on several occasions that afternoon, introducing Odhran to some of his friends among the crew, chatting with him further and asking for his thoughts on other rumors he had heard about Rhyden Fabhcun and his magic. He seemed to genuinely appreciate Odhran's thoughts and opinions, and Odhran had been surprised and pleased when Hodder had come to him earlier that evening, inviting him along for a night's revelry in Capua.

"You have been a help to me, lad," Nimon had said. "And proven yourself a fine enough fellow besides, officer or not. Come along, why do you not? The least I can do is buy you a few portars."

At the mention of the word "officer," Odhran's eager expression had faltered. He had heard Captain Fainne's admonitions to the crew about Capua earlier, and he knew Pryce was as likely to sprout wings from his ass and fly as he was to grant Odhran permission to go ashore. He had told Nimon this, and Nimon had frowned.

"That pompous little bastard pup," he said. "I would wager I know how he found himself such a fancy rank. I have heard he and the Captain have been close as kin since he was a lad. I can imagine how close with so many years spent together at sea, eh?" He had dropped Odhran a conspicuous wink, and gave his hips a lewd, demonstrative thrust. Odhran had not believed for a moment that Wen's father was buggering the young lieutenant, but he had laughed nonetheless, grateful to find someone else aboard who did not think Pryce Finamur had set the moon itself aloft in the sky.

Thanks to Pryce, Odhran was stuck aboard the ship while his new friends, Nimon Hodder and the

others headed out to Capua. Odhran could fairly well count on not having Wen for company that night ... she would probably be too busy trailing behind Pryce, daft-eyed and gushing ... which meant he would be left with no one to talk to but Cluer Haely—nearly as insufferable as Pryce—or drunken crewmen who were little more than strangers to him. He could hear the sounds of music and the stomping of dancing from overhead making their way down to the berth deck. Odhran frowned. He would not be able to even find some solitary peace in reading, or turning in early with that racket to distract him.

"The crew needs a celebration," Pryce had told him, his tone of voice condescending. "Especially after all that has happened. We need a reason to feel some joy again, some release, even for a little while."

"And the Good Mother knows if Pryce Finamur says it, it must surely be so," Odhran muttered.

The stateroom door opened and he jumped, startled. Wen looked at him from the doorway, the corner of her mouth lifting. "Sorry to scare you," she said.

"You did not," he said, frowning. "What are you doing down here?"

She stepped inside and closed the door behind her. "It is my room, too."

"I mean, why are you not topside at the celebration?" he asked. He considered adding *following Pryce about and fawning over him*, but decided to hold his tongue.

"I wanted to ask the same of you," she said.

"I do not feel much like celebrating."

Wen sat next to him on his bed. He had always considered her to be one of the most beautiful women he had ever set eyes on. How the rest of the officers and crew aboard the *Maorga* could believe she was a man—with her lean, shapely figure, delicate features, large eyes and full, lovely mouth—was beyond him. He could not remain sore with her for very long ... even if she did fancy Pryce Finamur. He had known her too well and loved her for too long not to soften at her gaze, to weaken at her smile.

Why do you not fancy me, Wen? he wanted to ask her. *What has Pryce ever done, except show you how to tie a knot? I crossed the bloody damn Muir Fuar sea for you. I am likely going to be expelled from school and throttled by my parents—and all for you.*

"They have portar," Wen said, poking him in the ribs with her elbow. "Barrels of it, Odhran."

"I do not want any portar—stop it, Wen," he said.

"What?" Wen smiled at him, feigning shock. She draped the back of her hand against his brow, pretending to check for fever. "Odhran Frankley does not want a pint? Are you sick?"

She knew he loved her; that was the worst of it. Odhran had harbored that secret for many long years before a night into his cups a year ago had loosened his heart and tongue enough to offer it in mortifying, drunken admittance. He had tried to kiss her, even, and for one sweet, fleeting moment, he had thought she might let him. His mouth had drawn so near to hers, he could feel her breath delicately against his face, and then she had smiled at him, drawing her hand between them, pressing her fingertips lightly against his lips.

"Odhran, do not," she had said to him softly.

"But I ... I love you, Aelwen," he had told her, making her smile again.

"I know." She had not needed to say more. She did not feel the same for him, and he knew it. He had always known it, but that sudden realization had cleaved his heart to the core still the same. He had lowered his face, embarrassed and hurt. When he had stammered out a clumsy apology, she had cradled his face between her hands and kissed his brow. "I am sorry, Odhran," she had whispered.

I am, too, Wen, he thought unhappily, watching her smile at him in their stateroom. "They have women," she said. She lay her hands upon his shoulders and leaned toward him, grinning broadly. "Lots of women—and all of them lovely. Father sent them, bought and paid for. You should come and see."

"I told you, I do not feel like celebrating," he said again, flapping his elbow to shoo her away.

"You did not seem to mind the idea of celebrating with Nimon Hodder and his fellows in Capua." He glanced at her, surprised that she knew. "Pryce told me you had asked him to go, that he told you no. You would celebrate with the likes of Hodder, but not me?"

Pryce needs to keep his bloody mouth shut, Odhran thought dourly. "What do you mean, 'the likes of Hodder?' Nimon is very nice, I will have you know. I have been talking to him quite a bit today, and he is not half the lout Pryce would have you think he is."

"Pryce would not have me think anything," she said. "I can do that just fine on my own, thank you kindly. Nimon Hodder likes to make trouble, Odhran, and he will gladly draw you along with him, if he can. You did not tell him, did you?"

"Tell him what?"

"What you talked to me about last night, about the storms in Belgaeran, about Rhyden Fabhcun."

She would be angry with him if he told her the truth. "No, I did not tell him about that," he said.

"Because nothing would come of it but trouble, you know," she said. "Hodder is not the sort to let matters lie, and Father is ashore with Rhyden, even as we speak. If Hodder decided he wanted to make trouble, it would involve Father, too."

Odhran blinked at her, his breath drawing still; this had not occurred to him at all. He had never considered that Nimon might have wanted to venture into Capua to plan something against Rhyden. When he had said, "We are not sailing any further with that damned, bewitching Elf. I will bloody well see to that," Odhran had simply assumed Nimon meant to speak with Captain Fainne, voice his concerns and objections, or maybe even refuse to continue onward with the *Maorga* crew for Cneas. He suddenly realized that the words might have held more ominous meaning than he had originally interpreted

I will bloody see to that

and that Nimon's voyage ashore with his fellows might have been for more purpose than simply a night spent at the taverns and brothels.

"You might be surprised to realize this," he told Wen, finding his voice in the pit of his knotted stomach. "But Nimon does talk about other things besides Elves and magic."

"You are right ... that would surprise me."

"We talked about Capua. He has been here before, at least a dozen times, he told me. He said your father was not entirely right, and there is plenty of fun to be had. That is why he asked me to go. He knew I wanted to see it."

Wen arched her brow. "Given the source, I would say I am more inclined to believe Father's account of things," she said.

Nimon would not do anything to hurt Captain Fainne, Odhran thought. I do not think he would dare do anything against Rhyden, either, but I know he would not hurt the captain. He is paying Nimon's wages, and Nimon has no ill-will toward him. Surely he would not try anything, not tonight, not while the Captain is with Rhyden ashore.

"They are out to have fun," he told Wen, as much to reassure her as himself. "Not find any trouble for themselves."

"They had best not," Wen said. "Or Father will see the lot of them clapped in chains in the hold until we get back to Tiralainn." She smiled at Odhran again and stood, catching him by the hands. "Speaking of fun ... come on now. Do not sit here moping, not when there is a party underway on the deck."

"I am not moping," he said as she tugged playfully at his arms, trying to pull him to his feet.

Her brows narrowed in mocking severity as she pretended to be stern. "I will not take no for an answer, Odhran," she said, coaxing him to his feet.

He could not help himself, and smiled for her. *That is good, as I have never been able to refuse you, Wen,* he thought as she led him from the stateroom.

* * * *

"Nimon Hodder, you son of a bastard, three-legged mule! I thought I smelled a fetid stench in the air!" Mongo Boldry exclaimed, spreading his arms wide in familiar greeting.

"Mongo Boldry ... by my bloody damn boot heels!" Nimon Hodder said, struggling to force a smile onto his face. He nearly stumbled as Mongo stepped towards him, clasping his arms about Nimon's shoulders, hugging him fiercely.

Nimon and his fellows had just crossed the threshold of the Pauper's Pyre, a cramped, crowded and dimly lit tavern near the Capuan waterfront. Already, the sailors had made the rounds of three neighboring pubs, downing portars all the way. Nimon knew the blame for his brazen daring at entering one of Mongo's establishments was the foolhardy result of all of the liquor pooling in his gut, and he rued his own recklessness now that he had been discovered.

Mongo Boldry was the owner of the Pyre and a sometime acquaintance to Nimon from his numerous visits to Capua over the years. Mongo was also one of the larger entrepreneurs in Capua proper, boasting title and deed to nine pubs, eight distanuir houses, seven brothels, and five of the largest ... and most notorious ... slave markets in the city. He was a venalium, profiteer and a no-account bastard who ran a broad and far-reaching network of flesh traders, bootleggers, prostitutes and smugglers throughout the Torachan an empire.

Mongo had been standing with his back to the doorway of the pub as Nimon had entered. He had been

leaning over the edge of the bar in counsel with his barkeep, but there was no mistaking his tall, lanky form, or the length of his silver-streaked black hair, which he always wore fashioned in a plait down his back. By the time Nimon had spied him, and entertained bright, panicked thought of turning around and ducking back out onto the street, it was too late. Mongo had turned his head and caught sight of him, remembering his face with apparent and astounding clarity.

Mongo clapped his hand against Nimon's shoulder and stepped away, grinning broadly. "Mother Above, it is about time you dragged your sorry carcass back to us!" he said. His words were friendly and his smile seemed sincere, but there was something in his eyes, a hard dark glint in his gaze that made Nimon's portar-laden gullet suddenly twist unhappily. "What are you doing here, you bloody bastard? Look at you! What has it been ... two years? Three?"

"Two at least," Nimon said. "I am here with a ship. What, do you think I bloody damn walked here? These are my friends ... good lads, the lot of them." He turned, offering his arm in a broad, sweeping gesture, slapping patrons crammed about him as he gestured at his fellows from thea'*Maorga*. "We have only just arrived tonight."

"Hoah, well, then, a round for you all," Mongo said. He glanced over his shoulder, calling out to the bartender. "Pernicus! A round of portars for our good Master Hodder and his crew, if you will ... make them welcome!"

The sailors, most of them as drunk as Nimon by this point ... if not more so ... all bellowed in enthusiastic approval and swarmed toward the corner of the crowded bar as the keep set about drawing draught mugs for them each. Nimon moved to follow them, hoping that this act of seeming cordial greeting would be the last of his encounter with Mongo, a gracious indication that by-gones would be left by-gones, and all was well between them. He cringed visibly, sucking his breath through gritted teeth as Mongo clapped him firmly on the shoulder, halting him in mid-stride.

"Give me a moment, Nimon, do not run off so soon," Mongo said, and again, although he was smiling, there was that hard, nearly menacing gleam in his eyes. "It has been so long, and I have missed you."

"Hoah, well, yes, alright then," Nimon said, trying vainly to shrug his way loose of Mongo's grasp. He uttered a high, nervous laugh and forced a smile. "Tell me, Mongo, how fares your wife?"

"Cyriaca?" Mongo said with a grin. "She took a passing fancy to a young trader from Serdica little more than a year ago. I caught them bugging in my bed. I cut the bitch's throat on the spot. Kept the boy around for awhile, carved a new little margin from his form day by day for the better part of a month until at last the gangrene took him."

Nimon blinked at him, his mouth slightly agape, his eyes growing very wide. Mongo threw back his head and laughed, tightening his grip on the smaller man's shoulder. "I am joking with you, Hodder! What sort of monster do you take me for? She is fine and well ... and faithful, besides!"

Nimon managed another feeble, anxious laugh. "That ... that is good," he said.

Mongo moved his hand only long enough to hook his arm about Nimon's neck, drawing him close. "You owe me five thousand dorotus, Nimon," he said in a low voice that was nearly drowned in the din of boisterous conversations around them. Nimon heard him though, and plenty well; his bladder nearly loosened at the quiet, purring words.

"I know, Mongo," he whimpered.

Mongo tightened his arm about Nimon's neck, pinning Nimon's chin against his forearm. "Did you think I had forgotten?"

"No, Mongo," Nimon said, shaking his head fervently.

"You have a great deal of gall to step foot in Capua again, my friend, much less into my bloody damn pub," Mongo said.

"I ... I will give you the money," Nimon said, craning his head to look up at Mongo.

Mongo smiled at him gently. "Yes, you will," he agreed,

"No, I mean it, Mongo ... please. I will give you the money."

"Yes, you will," Mongo said again. "You are not leaving this tavern until you give it to me." He released Nimon, his smile broadening as he watched the man stagger away from him, his eyes wide with alarm.

"Tonight?" Nimon asked, breathlessly. "You ... you want it tonight? Are you bloody mad? I do not have that sort of coinage on me."

"That is unfortunate," Mongo told him. "Might I suggest you find something or someone among your meager lot of fellows then, who might be worth five thousand dorotus before you try to leave? Otherwise, Jasper and Seneca, my mates by the door there, will be glad of heart to see to its remittance for you."

Nimon glanced towards the door, peering through the jostling crowd and found two enormous brutes positioned on either side of the threshold. They both stood with their thick arms crossed at their broad, muscled chests, glaring at Nimon, fully aware of their employer's conversation, and apparently, the purpose of it.

Nimon did not know who was who, Jasper or Seneca. He supposed when they were forcibly wrenching one's liver from their lights, such things as proper introduction seldom mattered.

"Take your time," Mongo told him, slapping him affably on the arm. "Have a portar or two ... enjoy yourself, and your friends. We are open the night through, and you, my good man, are going nowhere." He turned around, all friendly smiles and warm greetings to patrons as he strolled back to the bar. "It is good to have you back, Nimon," he called out over his shoulder. "You have been sorely missed."

* * * *

Gaius Leonius Vespasian was in Capua and Mongo Boldry was in foul humor because of it. The bloated Nobilissimus from Apamea in southern Torach had sent his heralds to Mongo to announce his arrival that afternoon like he was the damn rotted Pater Patriae, or emperor, himself. Vespasian was a wealthy landowner; a man whose name and penchant for slave purchases was well known and familiar among venalium throughout the realm.

Mongo had never met Vespasian, but he knew of him nonetheless. He had summoned Mongo to meet with him, as if Mongo were no better than a well-heeled mutt at his beckon, and Mongo had gone, loathing himself for his pathetic yielding, unable to resist the promise of Vespasian's considerable purse.

Nimon Hodder could not have picked a worse night to crawl out from beneath whatever moldering rock

he had been cowering beneath for the last two years. Mongo genuinely did not care about the five thousand dorotus Nimon owed him, coins lost and due from some poorly played hands of dystanuir in one of his gambling halls. But Mongo had spent the better portion of a perfectly good day enduring the insufferable company of Gaius Vespasian, and as a result, by the time he spied Nimon slinking into the Pauper's Pyre, he was feeling surly and vindictive.

"I should like to find a slave of a more exotic nature," Vespasian had told him, cradling a goblet of wine against his swollen palm. His pudgy fingers were curled about the broad basin of the cup, the gold, bejeweled rings crammed along each of his knuckles glittering in warm lamplight.

"I have some from Bagahan, my lord, who have only just arrived this morning," Mongo said.

Vespasian's eyebrows had been plucked nearly to extinction. As was the height of fashion for Torachan noble society, he wore his face painted a ghastly shade of alabaster; twin splotches of scarlet rouge, and vermilion tint upon his lips lent him the appearance of a man who had suffocated. His cosmetics had been meticulously applied, with thin-tipped brushes used to trace slender, twining blue lines along his cheeks and jowls, mimicking veins and capillaries just beneath the flesh. He wore a puffed and powdered wig, and a garish ensemble of matching justicoat, waistcoat and breeches, his ruffled cravat sprouting from beneath his overlapping chins like the desperate hand of a drowning victim, flailing for aid. When he frowned—as he did at Mongo's words—his countenance became tangled somewhere between hilarious and gruesome.

"Do you know how many of my Apamean noble fellows have slaves from Bagahan?" he asked, wrinkling his nose as though he smelled something offensive. "Decimus Cyriacus has twenty-three in his stable alone. It has become so commonplace as to be gauche. I said exotic, Mister Boldry, not pathetic. Something from the east, the Bara'Qadan mountains, mayhap."

"Perhaps my lord would care to visit my catastas, then," Mongo offered, making diligent effort to maintain a note of cordial civility in his voice. "You may peruse my offerings at your leisure. I am certain among the countless specimens I have collected, you will find something that would pique your interest, Lord Vespasian."

Vespasian snorted. He took a long, noisy slurp from his goblet, paying no heed to the fact that wine inadvertently dribbled down his chin in a thin, meandering rivulet and splattered against his cravat, staining the white linen with blood-colored spots. "I have been to your catastas already," he said, flapping his hand dismissively. "And I must say, Mister Boldry, I find your fare to be lacking in abundance. I should not need to mention the great distance I have traveled—at dreadful inconvenience to myself—all because rumor and reputation of your markets have made it to Apamea."

"I am grateful that such might precede me, my lord," Mongo said.

Vespasian frowned again. "You should not be," he said. "For it seems to mine eyes that rumor and reputation is all that you have in your favor, Mister Boldry. Your catastas, sir, are offensive in their banality. If I wanted wide-eyed children, disoriented drunks or Bagahan whores, I might not have ventured any further than the markets of my own city."

"I am sorry that you were displeased, my lord," Mongo said, somewhat dismayed. He had disliked the fat bastard rot nearly from the moment of their introduction, but at least he had consoled himself with the knowledge that Vespasian would likely spend dorotus with him—and a great many of them at that. It was as though Vespasian had just spent the last hour dangling a swollen coin purse over Mongo's awaiting palm, only to snatch it back without warning.

"Mayhap I should explore some of your rival markets in the city before I take my leave," Vespasian remarked, tapping his finger against his painted lips in feigned, prolific thought. "I understand that a Mister Publius Felix runs several large catastas on the southern side. Perhaps he shall have something more befitting my tastes."

Publius Felix was no rival to Mongo; his fetid auction dens bartered the refuse and worthless curs Mongo turned away from his own. However, Mongo knew Vespasian's reputation well enough from hearsay to realize the nobilissimus might very well buy some scrap from Felix's market just to spite Mongo for his own seeming lack of selection—and that Felix would exploit this profitable coup for all it was worth among their fellow venalium. Such a ploy could well prove devastating to Mongo; flesh traders came to him first, not only upon arrival in Capua, but in the whole of Torach as well. He had first pick of all of the prospective slaves in the entire empire, even before the opulent auction houses of Cneas. Mongo had his hooks sunk deeply within the flesh industry of the empire, but it would not take much—a well-placed blow from someone of Vespasian's wealth and clout—to see that stranglehold loosened. If Vespasian was displeased with Mongo, the traders' circuit would learn of it in short measure, and when they did, they would likely reconsider offering him first choice of new slaves. They might take their business southward to Cneas or Serdica—or worse, they might keep it in Capua, but give it to Publius Felix instead.

Vespasian could ruin him, and he bloody well knew it—and he knew that Mongo knew it, too, the rotted bastard. Mongo had plastered a charming smile on his face as he had met the nobleman's gaze.

"I will find something that should please you, my lord," he said. "Give me a few hours, let me confer with my traders, and I am certain arrangements can be made to suit your fancy."

It had taken complimentary services from a bevy of his finest—and most pricey—whores, along with all of the wine and food Vespasian wanted at one of Mongo's nearby brothels to convince the nobleman to grant Mongo another chance. Mongo had until midnight to find some potential slave exotic enough to tempt Vespasian's purse. Mongo had spared his reputation—for the moment—but he knew he was in trouble. He knew his stock well because he hand-selected each and every man, woman and child who was sold upon his auction blocks. If Vespasian had seen nothing that pleased him, Mongo would likely not, either, and now he found himself at the considerable disadvantage in that Vespasian did not expect to be pleased. He had accepted the proffered liquor and whores because he was not an idiot, but that did not mean he would humor Mongo's attempts and buy something from his catastas. In fact, no matter Mongo's efforts, the bloated bastard had likely settled in his mind already not to do so.

That bloody rot, Mongo had thought with a scowl as he stood at the bar in the Pauper's Pyre. When he had caught sight of Nimon Hodder, he had been nearly murderous with rage and frustration over his unfortunate circumstances. Mongo recognized a good opportunity when presented with it. He could not rail at Gaius Vespasian for causing him such trouble, but he hoped he might find some measure of relief in tormenting Hodder—and in the end, as Mongo walked away, leaving Hodder quaking like a sodden rabbit behind him, he realized that he had.

* * * *

I am a dead man, Nimon thought in dismay, watching Mongo walk away. He had been granted a reprieve, but it would prove only temporary mercy, and he knew it. Mongo was a sadistic bastard who kept his word. Nimon would not be leaving the Pauper's Pyre that night without tendering his debt one way or the other. He closed his eyes and cursed himself, even as his fellows from thea *Maorga* found their way to him once more, portars in hand, laughing and clapping him on the back in oblivious good humor, toasting their good fortune and his health.

What health? his mind shrieked as one of the sailors, a man name Lupaen, pressed an overflowing mug between his hands. The evening had started off so well ... a few drinks with his friends, just enough to muster some mettle between them, and then they would find the rotted Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun. He had not really considered what would happen then, except that Nimon imagined the lot of them pounding the bastard Gaeilge with their fists and boots, pummeling him to a bleeding, wretched pulp and then abandoning him to die, moaning and hurting, alone in an alley somewhere.

"Let him try his bloody Elf magic on us, then!" he had crowed to his friends upon their arrival at the pier, and the sailors had all cheered for him, as though he was a hero to be emulated among them and admired.

Nimon guzzled the portar, gulping greedily at it, trying to find some semblance of reason and logic within the liquor. He had lost whatever he called his own by nature ... which was not much to begin with, granted ... to earlier pints ... and of course, between the thighs of the lovely, redheaded whore whose company he had enjoyed before venturing so foolishly into the Pyre. He only had seventy-two dorotus left to his name ... nowhere near enough to satisfy Mongo ... and he knew that he was in trouble.

Nimon would have bartered the sailors with them, trading them each and all gladly to the catasta auction block if he had thought the lot of them combined would be worth five thousand dorotus to Mongo. However, all among their group were simple landmen, like him, their services bought and bartered from merchant vessels at Cuan'darach. None of them were Crown Navy sailors, and none better than hapless drunks. The twelve combined would not net five hundred dorotus on the slave market, much less five thousand.

I am a dead man, he thought again, his stomach wrenched with the icy draught and his own miserable terror.

He glanced towards the far corner of the pub and froze, his mug poised halfway to his mouth. His breath drew still and his eyes widened.

Captain Fainne was sitting at the end of the bar, in the rear corner of the narrow tavern. He had not yet noticed some of his crew among the patrons, because his attention was elsewhere, focused on his conversation.

The Elf sat next to him. There was no mistaking Rhyden Fabhcun's long, blond hair; it was him, the bloody rotten bastard Gaeilge was in the Pauper's Pyre, not fifty paces from where Nimon was standing.

"Bugger me," Nimon whispered. He turned and shouldered his way past the sailors, shoving through the crowd, rising onto his tiptoes and straining to find Mongo. He caught sight of the man's silver and black braid and hurried forward, slopping his portar across the front of his coat and doublet in the process.

"Mongo," he said, reaching out and snatching hold of Mongo's sleeve. Mongo had been speaking with a fetching, buxom woman at the bar, his mind and eyes trained more upon her breasts than her end of the discussion. At Nimon's touch, Mongo turned, his brow arched, and he smiled.

"Master Hodder," he said warmly, as though only moments ago, he had not nearly throttled the breath from Nimon. "What may I do for you, my friend? I am afraid one round of free portars is the extent of my generosity. I do have a business to keep."

Nimon leaned toward his ear, keeping a fast hold upon his shirt. "Look to your right, toward the end of

the bar," he breathed.

Mongo canted his head slightly, looking over his right shoulder. "And what am I looking at, Nimon, besides the back of my pub?"

"The Median at the far corner," Nimon said. "In the blue uniform, dark hair, with the dusky skin..."

"I know what a Median looks like, Nimon," Mongo said dryly. "I see him. What of it? They venture northward sometimes."

"He is my captain," Nimon said. "An officer of a merchant frigate, *thea'Maorga*, of the Tiralainn Crown Navy."

"Tiralainn?" Mongo arched his brow again and looked down at Nimon. "How did a lout like you wind up aboard a frigate of Tiralainn's Crown Navy?"

"Bad luck ... the worst sort, it would seem," Nimon assured him, making Mongo chuckle.

"So you would give me your captain," Mongo said. "Are you not a deceitful rot, Nimon Hodder? Sorry to disappoint you in your desperate measures, but he is a bit too old to be a worthwhile investment. A Median of his age on the *catasta* will not fetch five thousand *dorotus* ... even a Naval officer."

"Not him," Nimon hissed, digging his fingers fiercely into Mongo's arm. "The one next to him."

Mongo turned and looked again. Nimon heard the quiet intake of his breath, and Mongo became very still as he stared at Rhyden Fabhcun. The corners of Nimon's mouth unfurled slowly in a thin, crooked smile. "He is an Elf," he whispered, rising onto his toes and speaking almost directly against Mongo's ear.

Mongo blinked at him. "You are jesting."

Nimon shook his head. "He is a full-blooded Gaeilge, an Elf from the southrealm of Tiralainn."

"He is magnificent," Mongo murmured, turning to look down the length of the bar once more. Had Nimon been able to read Mongo's mind, he would have heard one word resounding within: *Vespasian*.

"They live three-fold the lifetime of a man," Nimon told him. "And this one is young ... only thirty-six. He has centuries left to live."

"Centuries," Mongo said softly, not averting his astonished gaze from the Elf.

"He does not grow ill," Nimon said. "He heals as new from nearly any injury within days. He will never look old, as we do. That fair face and lean form? They are his until he dies."

"And you know him?" Mongo asked, sparing Nimon a glance.

"He sailed here with us," Nimon said. "Aboard *thea'Maorga*."

"An Elf," Mongo said. "A bloody Gaeilge Elf here in Capua. I have never seen the likes."

"And no one else likely has, either," Nimon told him pointedly, drawing his gaze in full.

"He is worth five thousand to me," Mongo said, leaning toward Nimon until their noses nearly touched.

"He will be worth a far cry more than that upon the catasta," Nimon said.

Mongo caught him by the throat, his broad hand crushing against Nimon's windpipe, wrenching a startled, squawking cry from him. "You let me worry about how much he will fetch at the block," he hissed. "You just worry about how I am going to get him there. Do you want your debt tendered, Nimon, and all well between us once more? Nod your head or shake it."

Nimon nodded his head frantically, gargling for breath.

"Good, then," Mongo said, releasing him. Nimon stumbled, clutching at his throat and gasping loudly. "You will help me claim him, and when he is mine, it will be even ... nothing owed."

"That ... that is fair," Nimon wheezed. "I ... I already have a plan in mind to that effect."

Mongo smiled, turning his eyes once more to the young Elf at the far corner of the pub. He was perhaps the most exquisite creature in form and features Mongo had ever seen. He could not imagine the amount of dorotus Vespasian would eagerly part with for the Gaeilge at the slave auction, but his smile broadened all the more just to fancy the prospects. "Splendid, then, Nimon," he murmured. "I knew I was glad to see you again."

Chapter Eight

RAPTIO

"His name is Vaughan Ultan," Aedhir said, tilting his head back and draining his tumbler of brimague. He glanced at Rhyden, his brow raised. "The man I punched in Tiralainn. The one Iona left me for."

They had been sitting in the pub, the Pauper's Pyre for several hours, making their way in joint and concerted effort through two bottles of brimague. They were both pleasantly befuddled by the liquor, their postures relaxed, their tongues loosened in amicable discourse.

"I suppose I could say Lord Ultan is the cause of all of my troublesome lots in life," Aedhir remarked, exchanging his glass for his toitin case. He pulled a toitin out and slipped in it his mouth. "Though that would be unfair. I am the only one to thank or blame for my circumstances, as Iona so kindly pointed out to me. I cannot rightly condemn the man for finding something worthwhile in the woman to love. I am guilty of that myself."

"Iona was not his to want or find," Rhyden said quietly. "She belonged to another. She was your wife, Aedhir."

"Not to hear her account of the matter," Aedhir said. He struck flints to light his toitin and blew out a sharp puff of smoke. It wafted about his head in a dim haze as he poured himself another two-fingers worth of brimague. Rhyden had never seen a man drink with as much determination or tolerance as Aedhir. Rhyden had to consume quite a bit of brimague to feel any of its effects; his Elfin healing kept the liquor flushing through his system nearly as swiftly as he swallowed it. He had downed nearly a full bottle on his own, and Aedhir had matched him glass for glass.

"That is what she told me in her letter, the one she left to tell me she was gone. 'We married in the folly of youth,' she told me. 'Though you cannot call the arrangement between us *marriage* in its proper sense. Vows exchanged without legal documents to seal them means naught in our newly restored, civilized society.'" Aedhir shook his head and laughed softly, without humor. "I have the bloody damn thing memorized, can you believe it? Every line and measure, seared within my mind." He offered a shrug and inhaled upon his toitin. "Does anybody ever truly belong to another, Rhyden? Can legal vows and official documents bind someone's heart forever? I do not think so."

Rhyden took a long drink of brimague. "You are right," he said. "It is love that binds us."

"And sometimes it throttles us," Aedhir said, letting smoke curl forth from a small part in his lips. "And sometimes, it just fades away. I used to think it was right nice of Vaughan, the way he would make time for Iona while I was gone ... see to matters around the house and grounds for her. And he always seemed fond of Aelwen, bringing her presents, doting upon her." He smirked. "You can imagine how foolish I felt when I realized just how deep his affections ran."

"His heart lay with Iona," Rhyden murmured. "And the rest of him besides."

Aedhir laughed. "That is good," he said, raising his glass in a slight, approving toast. "And the rest of him besides.' I like that." He drained the tumbler empty, smacking his lips together softly. "Though to Vaughan's credit, he has spent seventeen years with Iona. He must love her truly. And he has been a good father to Aelwen. I have not seen her to know, but I have heard. I have my means. She has wanted for naught. The best tutors and schools, the finest clothes, the elegant whirlwind of Belgaeran's aristocratic society. She has known a far better life than she ever would have with me."

"You do not know that, Aedhir," Rhyden said.

"I was angry at first to realize they had told her for so long that I was dead," Aedhir said. "But I can see their point of view now. It was easier that way. Easier than to explain a stranger who comes only so often, and stays only for so long. It would have been confusing for Aelwen. She would not have understood."

He lowered his eyes toward the bar, his brows lifting sadly. "If only my heart was so easily deceived. I still think of her, do you know? Every day, there is that moment when I stop and wonder what she is doing, what she looks like ... her fragrance, her laughter. I wonder if she is happy. I wonder if she cries ... or if she ever thinks about me."

"You are her father," Rhyden said gently, placing his hand against Aedhir's wrist. "How could she not?"

"I am a distant memory to her, if even that," Aedhir said. "She knows I live now, but I cannot hope that will change things. If Iona meant to hurt her ... hurt me ... she would not have kept my letters to Aelwen all of these years. I know it. She would have destroyed them, burned them. She kept them. She wanted Aelwen to have them one day, to know the truth, and know me. One day when she was ready ... when they were both ready." He sighed heavily. "Aelwen hates her mother now, and I cannot bear that. Iona is not a bad woman ... and Vaughan Ultan is not a bad man, no matter how much more simple things would be if they were. They love Aelwen. I do not want to come between that. I do not have that right anymore."

"What if Aelwen wants to see you?" Rhyden asked.

Aedhir turned to him, stricken and unhappy. "I do not know," he said. "I wrote her letters all of those

years, and some part of me wanted to see her ... to be a part of her life, but I think I knew, Rhyden. I think I knew when she never wrote me back what Iona must have told her ... or maybe I just know Iona well enough to have realized what she would do. Maybe it was easier for me, too. I felt safe knowing I could write to her, confide in my letters, feel I had built some sort of relationship with her, a love and all of the while, in my heart, I knew it was a lie."

* * * *

It was as though Aedhir had just reached into Rhyden's mind ... into his very heart ... and drawn forth the truth of his own unhappiness, his own circumstances. His love for Qynh had been built on letters; for fifteen years, it had grown in printed verses and prose. He had been shocked and dismayed to discover it had never been Qynh who had written to him, but at the same time, his true devastation had come from the realization that some part of him had always known. It had been too good to be true, too perfect to be real, and he had never wanted to admit that; it had been easier to believe the lie his heart offered him.

"Besides," Aedhir offered with another short laugh. "Aelwen will likely never get the chance to see me. I have been giving the matter a great deal of thought today, and I do not think I will be returning to Tiralainn."

"Aedhir, no," Rhyden said. "You cannot abandon your career. You have worked too hard for it ... earned it."

"Yes, I have," Aedhir nodded. He rubbed the toitin scrap against the basin of a shallow brass dish, snuffing it out. "And therein lies my offense. Iona might not have left me if I had not taken to the sea. I might know my daughter yet. Like I said, I have no one to thank or blame but myself. Maybe I need to lose my career. Maybe I deserve to lose it."

"You do not," Rhyden told him. "And you will not. I have seen to that for you."

"What?" Aedhir asked, puzzled.

"I sent a letter to Kierken tonight at the harbor courier," Rhyden said. "They have to send it southward to Cneas, and from there to Cuan'darach. It will be five weeks before Kierken receives it, but it will still arrive before you return to Tiralainn. I told him as I told the harbormaster tonight ... that I commissioned thea'*Maorga* and your crew to bring me to Cneas, and you graciously agreed. I wrote that with all of the excitement of late in Belgaeran, and the palace, I thought such departure would be for the best."

Rhyden reached beneath the lapel of his justicoat, into a pocket in the lining and pulled out a money purse. He dropped the pouch, swollen nearly to overflowing with pences on the bar before Aedhir, and the coins inside jingled softly.

"What is this?" Aedhir asked.

"Twenty thousand marks," Rhyden said. "For my passage, Aedhir."

Aedhir blinked at him. "What?" He shoved the purse back toward Rhyden. "Are you mad? Put that away—do not flash that sort of money around here. You will get us both killed."

"Take it," Rhyden said, pushing the money at Aedhir again.

Aedhir frowned. "I will not."

"That will cover your crew wages and the repairs to your mast and sail," Rhyden said. "You left Cuan'darach without orders. How else were you expecting to pay your crew?"

"I told you how I would pay them ... out of my own pocket."

"I have plenty of money, and hardly spend any of it," Rhyden said. "And it will satisfy the King that I hired you."

Aedhir looked down at the pouch of coins, stricken. "I cannot take this, Rhyden."

Rhyden took Aedhir's hand and pressed it gently atop the purse. "Yes, you can," he said. "And you will. Put it in your pocket before someone sees. You will need to present it at the Cuan'darach duty registry to prove I paid my commission to you. I also explained to Kierken the circumstances of your encounter with that nobleman, this Lord Ultan. I asked him as a personal favor to make it go away, lest it trouble you upon your return. He will ... do not worry for it anymore." He smiled at Aedhir. "I can do that on occasion, ask favors of the King. He owes me his Crown twice now, in a manner of speaking, though I seldom remind him of it."

Aedhir stared at him, moved and amazed. "You would do this?" he asked softly. "All of this ... for me?"

"Yes," Rhyden said, nodding.

"Why, Rhyden?" Aedhir asked.

Rhyden smiled at him again. "Because you are my friend, Aedhir," he said.

"Captain Fainne!" a voice called out from behind them, rising above the collective din of the crowded pub. Rhyden and Aedhir turned in unison, looking over their shoulders, their brows raised in mutual, curious regard.

* * * *

"Captain Fainne, thank the Sweet Mother Above we have found you!"

Nimon Hodder and three other sailors from the *Maorga* shouldered their way through the throng towards them. Nimon was calling out to Aedhir, his eyes flown wide with apparent distress. Aedhir moved instinctively, dropping his feet to the floor and rising, standing with his body angled protectively in front of Rhyden. His brows drew narrow and his hand moved beneath the flap of his justicoat, reaching for the grip of his an'daga as he frowned at the approaching landmen.

"What do you want, Hodder?" Aedhir asked, reaching out and planting his free palm firmly against Nimon's shoulder, stopping him in mid-stride. He glared among the other three men. "The lot of you keep your distance. There will be no trouble here tonight."

"Trouble, sir?" Nimon asked, blinking owlishly at Aedhir as though completely confounded. He was obviously fairly well into his cups; his cravat and shirt were spotted and stained with spilled portar, and his eyes had a dazed, bleary cast to them brought about by too many pints. "Hoah, Captain Fainne, we ... we do not want trouble, sir, do we, lads?" He looked over his shoulder at his fellows, who all shook their heads and stumbled in place, wide-eyed and apparently as drunk as Hodder. "We have been looking for you, sir—thank the Good Mother we have found you, Captain!"

"Why have you been looking for me, Hodder?" Aedhir asked, still frowning, unmoved by Nimon's

innocent, doe-eyed facade.

"It is Lupaen Moynaghan, sir," Nimon said. "He ... hoah, Captain, he is in a terrible state."

"What has happened to him?" Aedhir said.

"He has drank himself to misery, sir," said another of the sailors. "We tried to get him to slow down on the portars, but he would have none of it, sir. We cannot get him to stand, much less stop his weeping."

"The storm last night, Captain, it rattled him something wicked," Nimon said. He clutched at Aedhir's hand. "He watched three men get blown off the port side and into the waves—lads he knew since boyhood, sir, and he himself only barely clung fast enough to the splintered railings to keep on the deck."

"He is inconsolable, sir," said another. "We have been trying for an hour now to get him to come with us back to the ship, but he will not listen. He has vomited on himself, and pissed besides, sniveling like a lass."

"He cannot rightly hold his head up, but when we try to hoist him up and bear him between us for the door, he screams and fights, sir," said the third. "Kicking and thrashing, cursing us and our kin. It is a sore and sorry sight, sir."

"Please, Captain Fainne, you must help us," Nimon pleaded. "Lupaen is a good enough lad, and he will be right 'round once more if we get him to the ship, in his hammock. He will not listen to us."

"But he admires you so, says he will not leave lest you tell it to him plainly," said another.

Aedhir sighed heavily, his brows furrowed deeply. "Where is he?"

"Right there," the sailors all said, their voices overlapping as they pointed together at a table in the back corner of the room, less than a dozen steps from Aedhir's bar stool. The crowd parted just briefly enough for Aedhir to catch a glimpse of the drunken, miserable sailor sitting with the rest of the ashore party from thea'*Maorga*. Sure enough, some of his friends were trying to get their arms around him, coax him to his feet, but with each attempt, Lupaen would frown and yowl at them, swinging his fists and spitting as he cursed.

Aedhir glanced at Rhyden. His instinctive response had been that Nimon was up to something, some sort of ruse to see harm come to Rhyden. However, Nimon seemed genuinely concerned for Lupaen's well-being, and had not even so much as spared Rhyden a second glance in his worry for his friend. Lupaen Moynaghan was not part of Aedhir's regular crew, but he had sailed with thea'*Maorga* a time or two in the past. Nimon was right; Lupaen was a good man, and to judge by Aedhir's observation, he was in a pathetic state of inebriation.

"I should go and speak with him," Aedhir said to Rhyden. "I have known him for some time. He will listen to me. Let me tell him to go with them back to the ship."

Rhyden nodded. "I understand," he said.

"Do not move from that stool," Aedhir told him. "I will be right over here—within earshot and sight."

Rhyden smiled. "I will be fine," he said.

* * * *

The group of sailors began to lead Aedhir with them, drawing him away from the bar towards Lupaen. As the crowd closed in behind them, Rhyden realized Nimon Hodder lingered where he stood, making no move to follow.

Rhyden pivoted in his stool to meet Hodder's gaze evenly, easily. He knew the things the man had been saying about him, but was not particularly troubled by his presence. Rhyden knew how to fight, and how to take care of himself. Hodder posed trouble to him aboard the ship with his ill-will, but in public, he was pathetic, if any threat.

Nimon lowered his gaze toward his shoes, looking somewhat sheepish beneath the unflinching weight of Rhyden's stare. "I ... I wanted to apologize to you, my lord," he said quietly, the noise of the crowd nearly muffling his words.

Rhyden did not say anything. He continued gazing at Nimon, his brow slightly raised, and after a long moment of such scrutiny, Nimon raised his eyes again. "I have caused trouble for you, sir," he said. He stepped toward Rhyden, draping his hands against Aedhir's vacant stool. "Unfounded troubles, Lord Fabhcun, and I am sorry for that, sir. Last night when you risked your own life, saw injury to spare the Captain, I ... I realized I was wrong." He extended his hand to Rhyden. "I had hoped to see you tonight away from the ship and crew, sir, that I might offer my amends, sir."

Rhyden studied him quietly. A slight ache had begun to stoke behind his brow, but he dismissed it as the result of too much brimague. Nimon seemed earnest enough in his words and expression, and he did not know what to make of it. He wanted to believe in the man's sincerity, not because he necessarily wanted to believe in Nimon Hodder, or count him as a friend. But if someone like Nimon could put aside his prejudices in good faith, change his mind and his measure, and then maybe...

Maybe I can, too, Rhyden thought. Maybe there is hope left, even for me.

Nimon stood before him, his hand outstretched, and at last, Rhyden relented, ignoring the nagging pain in his temples and quelling the quiet stir of misgivings within him as he accepted the proffered handshake.

"There are no amends to be made, Mister Hodder," he said.

Nimon smiled broadly, clasping Rhyden's wrist between his palms and pumping his arm vigorously, enthusiastically. "Hoah, you are kind to say so, my lord," he said. "And you are a gentleman, sir, in your pardon. I hope that you will give me the chance to prove my good intentions, my change of heart to you, my lord—for I fully mean to. By my breath, I do!"

"That is unnecessary, Mister Hodder," Rhyden said. Nimon seemed so genuinely pleased that his apology had been accepted, so eager as he shook Rhyden's hand, that Rhyden could not help but smile at him. "I hope that your friend will be alright," Rhyden said, nodding toward the corner of the room. He had lost sight of Aedhir in the crowd, but was not troubled by this.

Nimon's face grew sorrowful. "Lupaen? Yes, I do, as well. I cannot bear to see him like this." He settled himself into Aedhir's stool and rested his elbows on the bar. He folded his hands together and hung his head. "He is hurting, poor fellow. These have proven unfortunate circumstances for us all in some ways, I guess." He looked at Rhyden. "It makes one ponder his life, do you know? I realized how foolish I was in my perceptions of you, Lord Fabhcun, sir. I do not know much, but I know when I am wrong—and I admit it. Like I said, you might have died last night, but you still tried to save Captain Fainne. I do not know many menfolk who would find that sort of mettle within them. It was right decent of you, sir."

"Thank you, Mister Hodder," Rhyden said. He lifted his toitin case from the bar and noticed Nimon glance at it. "Would you like one?"

Nimon smiled at him. "That is kind of you, thank you," he said. He nodded at the empty brimague bottle before Rhyden. "You are empty, sir. Let me buy you another."

"You do not have to," Rhyden told him, striking flints as Nimon leaned forward, accepting the light to his toitin.

Nimon smiled again. "I want to, sir," he said, waving his hand to attract the barkeep's attention. "It is the least I can do."

He ordered a pair of brimague shots, one for each of them. When the barkeep presented them, Nimon took his glass in hand and lifted it. "To your health, Lord Fabhcun."

"To yours, Mister Hodder," Rhyden replied. He pressed the rim of the glass against his lip and canted his head back, downing the brimague in a single, swift swallow.

Nimon brought his glass toward his mouth to drink, but before he could take a sip, a hand fell against his shoulder, startling him. "Nimon Hodder! It is you, you bloody rot!" exclaimed a loud voice near his ear.

A man had come to stand near them, a tall and lean fellow with a heavy sheaf of coarse black hair that spilled down his back nearly to his waist. The dark sheaf was shot through with thick veins of blanched silver, and he wore it drawn back from his face and shoulders, fastened in a braid.

"Mongo Boldry!" Nimon exclaimed, grinning broadly. He set his brimague, untouched upon the bar, and hopped down from the stool. "Hoah, damn! How do you fare?"

The two men, obviously familiar friends, embraced one another warmly.

"I fare well—well indeed," said the tall man, Mongo Boldry, as he clapped Nimon on the shoulder. "When did you arrive? Why did you not send me word?"

"I have only just arrived tonight," Nimon said. He turned to Rhyden. "Let me make proper introduction. Here is a fellow from my ship—Rhyden Fabhcun. This is Mongo Boltry, a bastard rot I have not seen in many long months, and a good friend besides!"

Mongo smiled, offering his hand to Rhyden. "Pleased to meet you, sir," he said. "Welcome to Capua."

"Thank you," Rhyden said, smiling in return as he clasped Mongo's forearm in cordial greeting. "The pleasure is mine, sir."

"Hoah, this is splendid," Mongo said, looking at Nimon. "Mother Above, only yesterday, would you believe the wife was asking after you? 'Where has that Nimon Hodder been of late?' she says to me. 'I have missed him, and is he not sorely overdue to visit?'"

Mongo and Nimon chatted together, their happy, eager voices overlapping. All at once, the dull ache in Rhyden's head seemed to swell into a crescendo, and he closed his eyes, lowering his face and pressing his fingertips gingerly against his brow. *Something is wrong*, he thought.

You have been away from the Morthir—and around Elves again—too long, he heard Aedhir say within his mind. The air around him suddenly felt very heavy and thick, like a stifling wool blanket drawn about him. He had not taken any notice of the heat in the tavern, but all of a sudden, it collapsed upon him, threatening to suffocate him.

You have grown too trusting, Aedhir said.

"Aedhir..." he said softly, breathlessly. Voices blended all around him, slurring together and growing distant, nearly echoing in their resonance. He was very aware of the sound of his own breath; he felt like he was gasping as the hot, smothering air enfolded him. He could feel his pulse throbbing beneath his temple, hear the coursing sound of his heart's thrumming measure deep within his sensitive ears.

"Lord Fabhcun?" Nimon asked.

Elves do not lie to you, but menfolk certainly do.

Rhyden felt Nimon's hand settle against his shoulder and he opened his eyes, moaning softly as the world before him suddenly reeled. The wave of vertigo was powerful and alarming, and he grasped for the edge of the bar, his hands fumbling clumsily.

"Let ... let go of me..." he said, trying to shrug away from Nimon's hand. He blinked dazedly at the empty brimague glass on the bar and realized. "There was something in the drink," he whispered, looking blearily over his shoulder at Nimon. "You ... you put something..."

"Lord Fabhcun, are you alright?" Nimon asked again. It sounded as though he called to Rhyden from the far end of a very long corridor.

"You ... put something ... in the drink..." Rhyden whispered, as the room swung about again. He shoved his palm against his brow, struggling to clear his mind. "Hoah ... Aedhir..."

He felt something tickling in his sinuses, and then his nose began to bleed. He jerked his hand to his face, and heard Nimon cry out in sudden, frightened alarm.

"Get him outside," Mongo Boldry said, and Rhyden felt his arm slip around his back. "Can you stand, friend?"

"I ... I am not ... your friend," Rhyden groaned, shrugging his shoulder. "Aedhir...!"

"Lean on me," Mongo murmured softly to him, soothing. "Come on now. It is alright."

Rhyden crumpled against Mongo more than he stood on any accord of his own. He felt Mongo supporting his weight, trying to keep his legs beneath him as they began to move. Rhyden stumbled along, his eyes closed against the misery of vertigo, his forehead pressed against Mongo's shoulder. He realized that he was not being led out of the tavern; Mongo was ushering him backwards, drawing him along in clumsy, stumbling tow toward the rear of the pub.

"Stop," Rhyden said, shaking his head. He forced his eyes open and caught a fleeting glimpse of Aedhir, standing near enough that he might have reached out and caught his friend by the coat. Aedhir had his back to Rhyden, his attention in full upon his drunk crewman, Lupaen Moynaghan.

"Aedhir..." Rhyden began, but then a brutal wave of dizziness wracked him and he closed his eyes,

groaning, staggering. "Aedhir, no, le ... le do thoil..." *Please.*

"...too much brimague..." he heard Mongo say, his voice ebbing and flowing as though carried along a series of breaking waves. "...it will do that to you ... I have been in such a state myself more times than I can..."

"No..." Rhyden whispered, lifting his head. He shoved his hand against Mongo's chest and tried to pull away from him. "No ... let ... let me go..."

"It is alright," Mongo told him quietly, keeping his arm firmly about Rhyden, drawing him near.

"No," Rhyden said again, and Mongo pushed him against the wall, tucked in the corner of the room. Rhyden could feel his consciousness fading, his mind side-slipping into oblivion, and as his eyelids fluttered, he struggled not to swoon. "You ... rot bastard ... no..."

Mongo smiled at him. "It is alright," he said again, and then the floor beneath Rhyden's feet disappeared; a narrow trapdoor camouflaged among the polished planks snapped down and open, and Rhyden felt a rush of wind against him, flapping his hair in his face as he fell.

He landed hard enough to knock the breath from his lungs, toppling across a thin, scraggly mattress. He opened his eyes dazedly and saw a fleeting moment of dim, distant glow from somewhere above him. Nimon and Mongo looked down at him, silhouetted together, surrounded by the corona of light and then the trapdoor closed snapped once more with a loud, resounding report. Darkness descended upon Rhyden in full and he moaned softly, fainting.

* * * *

"It was horrible, Cap'n Fainne!" Lupaen Moynaghan yowled. He clutched at the lapels of Aedhir's great coat, his breath sour, reeking of portar, his shirt and coat damp with vomit. He sprayed Aedhir's cheek with spittle as he launched into at least the fifth recounting of the storm, of watching men tumble overboard into the sea.

Aedhir shrugged himself away from Lupaen's grasp, struggling not to grimace as he wiped away the spit with the cuff of his hand. "I know it was, Mister Moynaghan," he said for at least the thousandth time. The man's drunken, rambling accounts made little sense to him; he yammered incoherently, a variety of horrific tales, none of which seemed to collaborate with the others. Aedhir grew aggravated with him, despite his best attempts to find some compassion for his wretched state. For a man who enjoyed to drink as he did, Aedhir had precious little patience for those who did likewise, and could not hold their liquor. He was also fairly convinced after so many contradicting recollections, that Lupaen had not seen men swept away by the storm at all, nor had he nearly been forced overboard, but rather, in his drunken state of mind, he was simply frightened and confused.

"They were screaming, sir," Lupaen said, his eyes enormous and bleary. His head listed clumsily on his broad neck. "I could hear them from below, in the water, Cap'n Fainne, I could hear them hollering and screaming for someone to help them ... to save them."

"Mister Moynaghan, you are drunk," Aedhir said quietly, leaning cautiously toward the man lest he get spattered with spit again.

"I am, yes, sir," Lupaen agreed, blinking owlshly, bobbing his chin up and down.

"Go back to the ship and sleep it off now," Aedhir said. "Put whatever you think you have seen to rest

awhile, and get some sleep."

"I do not think I seen it, sir," Lupaen said, clasping Aedhir's forearm. "I seen it, Cap'n. I seen it with mine own eyes. It ... hoah, Cap'n Fainne, it was horrible."

Aedhir did not want to venture down this rambling path again. He pulled his arm away from Lupaen's grasp and straightened his spine, staring sternly down at the sailor. "Mister Moynaghan, pull yourself in order," he said.

Lupaen blinked at him again, his voice fading. He had been just about to babble out another retelling, but held his tongue, wide-eyed.

"You are overwrought," Aedhir told him.

Lupaen nodded. "Yes ... yes, sir."

"Pull yourself together, man, and muster some wits about you. Go back to the ship. Let these fellows of yours lead you back to the piers and return to your hammock. Sleep this off."

Lupaen hitched in a breath to speak, and then his eyes darted over Aedhir's shoulder. Aedhir glanced behind him and saw Nimon Hodder standing there. Nimon was stumbling, as though he had just been jostled by someone passing him in the crowd. Nimon looked peculiar to Aedhir; his face was flushed brightly, glistening with a heavy sheen of sweat. He stared at Lupaen, and motioned in beckon with his hand.

"Come along now, Lupaen, you heard the Captain," he said, flapping his fingers. "You are going to see the lot of us in the hold. The Captain said to go ... let us just bloody go."

Lupaen nodded, his brows lifting as he sighed in woeful resignation. "Alright, then," he mumbled, as his chin drooped toward his chest. When two of his mates took him beneath the arms and hauled him to his feet, he did not resist. "I am sorry, Cap'n Fainne," he said, looking piteously at Aedhir.

"You will be even more so come the new morrow, I am afraid," Aedhir said. He turned to Nimon as the sailors began leading Lupaen past him, making their way clumsily through the crowd for the door. "See him back to the frigate. All of you ... back to thea'*Maorga*, and keep your bloody asses there. No more trips ashore."

Nimon looked down at his shoes, hunching his shoulders and seeming appropriately rebuked. "Aye, Captain," he said.

"You have proven a lot of trouble for me this voyage, Mister Hodder," Aedhir said, and Nimon blinked up at him, seeming surprised.

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you," Aedhir said, frowning. "And you bloody damn know it, Mister Hodder, so kindly remove that innocent look from your face. Put your boot heels and your ass ... and every other part of you besides ... back on my ship, keep your mouth shut and see if you can avoid any further mischief until we are back in Tiralainn."

Nimon nodded, looking at the floor again, his brows drawing slightly, petulantly. "Aye, Captain."

Aedhir scowled as he watched the group of sailors leave the pub. Not a one among them were any of his Navy hands; they were all landsmen and tars he had hired from merchant ships in Tiralainn. Some he knew vaguely from past acquaintance, and some, like Hodder, were relatively unfamiliar to him. As he had told Rhyden, he had been in a pinch, and had been unable to be particularly choosy in filling the voids within his crew for the voyage. All at once, he wished he had never hired a damn one of the louts. They were proving to be more bother to him than they could possibly be worth.

When he lost sight of them in the crowd, Aedhir turned and shouldered his way back to the bar. He frowned when he reached the pair of stools he and Rhyden had been sharing at the bar, only to discover two strangers sitting in their places, half-way through mugs of portar.

"Excuse me," Aedhir said, and the two men at the bar turned to him. "What happened to the man who was sitting here?"

"What man?" asked one.

The other frowned. "Sitting here when? These are our seats, mister."

"A few moments ago ... ten minutes, maybe. He was tall, with long blond hair to his waist and..." Aedhir's voice faltered as his gaze wandered toward the floor. He stooped, picking up Rhyden's wool great coat from where it had dropped from the seat. "This is his coat."

"That is a nice coat," one of the men remarked, hooking his brow at it. "You think he might have remembered it."

"We did not see anyone sitting here," said the other. "No one with long hair, no one at all."

Aedhir caught a wink of lantern light off of silver on the bar, and he reached between the men, the furrow between his brows deepening. "This is his toitin case," he said, snatching the slim silver box in hand.

"How do you know it is not mine?" one of the men asked, his voice sharp and surly, clearing indicating that he had been admiring the case and thought to keep it for himself.

"Because my friend's bloody damn initials are engraved on it," Aedhir said. At the fury apparent and stoking in his gaze, the man's face softened, his eyes widening.

"Take it, then, mister," he said softly, nodding his chin. "We do not want trouble here. We told you ... these seats were empty. No one was here."

Aedhir tucked Rhyden's toitin case in his coat pocket and shoved his way between the men. He leaned over the bar as the barkeep walked by, and reached out, grasping him firmly by the sleeve.

"Get your rotted hand off me," the barkeep growled, shrugging his shoulder mightily to dislodge Aedhir's grip. His hands were filled with ale mugs; he carried two in each broad fist, and foam sloshed across the floor in puddles as he jerked. "Get your knickers untwisted ... I will bloody get to you in a minute. Can you not see I am busy?"

"The man who was sitting here ... where did he go?" Aedhir asked.

The barkeep passed the four mugs to some patrons at the end of the bar. "Five and twenty," he told them, holding out his palm expectantly as they shelled out coins, counting between them, scraping lint from their pockets to meet the tab. The barkeep glanced over his shoulder at Aedhir. "What man sitting where?"

"The man sitting right here in this rot damn seat with me for the last three hours," Aedhir snapped, his rage mounting. "With long blond hair and a blue justicoat ... we were drinking brimague. I know you remember us."

The barkeep had been counting the assorted coins the men had offered him. He tucked the money in the pocket of his apron and came to stand in front of Aedhir, his arms crossed over his chest, his brow raised. "He left," he said. "I saw him leave not long after you got up and walked away."

"He left?" Aedhir blinked, bewildered. *Rhyden would not leave. I told him not to, and he knows the dangers in Capua.*

"Yup. Said he was not feeling well and needed some air."

"Did you see where he went?" Aedhir asked.

The barkeep frowned. "I do not keep track of folks' comings and goings," he replied. "So long as they pay their bills, they can do either as they please. His nose started to bleed and he left." He turned to leave; dozens of hands flapped at him, trying to glean his attention.

"Wait!" Aedhir cried after him, seizing his shirt once more. "His nose was bleeding?"

"That is what I said," the barkeep said, swatting Aedhir's hand away from his sleeve. "I imagine if he needed some air, he would likely go outside to find some. Maybe you should follow him."

He lumbered away, shaking his head. Aedhir tucked Rhyden's overcoat across his arm and began to shoulder his way through the crowd, hurrying, alarmed now. Rhyden had suffered a violent, peculiar nosebleed aboard the *Maorga* not too long ago; Aedhir had been standing with him on the deck when it had come upon him. It had lasted nearly a half an hour unabated, leaving Rhyden weak and dazed in its aftermath. In the days since, Rhyden had tried to pretend as though there was nothing amiss about the incident, but Aedhir had seen all too plainly that it had frightened and disturbed him as well.

He knew that if Rhyden had suffered another nosebleed as terrible as the one aboard the *Maorga*, he would have been startled and panicked by it. If he had stumbled outside, trying to stave the flow of blood by the pub's threshold, he might not have noticed the crewmen following him.

If he is bleeding again ... if Nimon Hodder and his fellows happen upon him alone ... Aedhir thought anxiously, and he quickened his pace, frowning as he shoved his way toward the door.

Nimon had been inciting ill-will against Rhyden among the crew nearly from the moment they had left port in Tiralainn. Hodder was drunk, as were his friends, and Aedhir knew all too well the mettle and daring a few pints could instill in even the most passive of characters. Alone outside, bleeding profusely, Rhyden would have been in a vulnerable position—one they might have eagerly seized upon.

There was no sign of Rhyden in front of the pub. The streets and boardwalks were crowded, and Aedhir jostled his way through the throng, looking desperately about. The buildings in Capua were crammed together along narrow thoroughfares; Aedhir peered into the gloomy, fetid shadows between

the tavern and its neighboring shops, hoping in vain that Rhyden might have sought some sanctuary from the swarms of pedestrians in one of the alleys.

Something has happened to him, Aedhir thought, his heart hammering in frantic measure beneath his coat. He had expected trouble out of the sailors; he cursed himself now for disregarding their potential threat as easily and lightly as he had. Despite Nimon's piteous implores, or Lupaen's drunken stupor, Aedhir had suspected they would try something against Rhyden before taking their leave. He was frightened to realize they might have taken such a chance.

But how? How could Hodder and the others have gotten to him? They could not have seen him leave. They were all stumbling around the table with Lupaen Moynaghan, every bloody damn one of them. Even Hodder stood with us. I kept my eyes on the lot of them the whole time.

All at once it occurred to him, and Aedhir's stride faltered. *Not all of them ... not the whole time.* He had not noticed Hodder until just before the sailors had left. Aedhir had turned to find Nimon behind him, nearly tripping over his own feet as someone bumped into him in the crowd.

What if Nimon was not stumbling in place, roughed about? What if he had only just been coming behind me and was staggering through the crowd? What if he lingered behind long enough to see Rhyden leave, to notice he was bleeding and realize...

He heard a loud bark of laughter rising above the din from the street traffic, and Aedhir's gaze snapped in the direction of the sound. It was Nimon Hodder's voice, his laughter, and Aedhir could see him now along the plank boardwalk ahead of him. Hodder and his friends walked along at a leisurely pace toward the waterfront, making their way among the crowd. They were laughing together, and Aedhir's frown deepened. Not a one of them seemed concerned any longer about Lupaen Moynaghan's state of well-being—in fact, Aedhir spied Lupaen among them, walking of his own accord, seeming perfectly fine in both his gait and disposition.

"Bugger me," Aedhir seethed. He shouldered his way into Rhyden's great coat lest he lose it, layering it over his own and shrugging his shoulders fiercely to settle all of the heavy layers of wool into place. He reached beneath the overlapping lapels, his fingers closing about the smooth wood and brass fittings of the an'daga's grip resting against his hip. The end of his index finger slid against the slim hook of the trigger; Aedhir had fired the pistol enough times and with great enough proficiency that the movement was nearly instinctive to him.

"You damn lot of rot bastards," he said softly, and he followed the sailors, shoving his way roughly through the crowd, his eyes ablaze with murderous fury. Hodder and his fellows were oblivious to his approach; they were occupied with guffawing loudly to one another, and when Aedhir caught up to them and snatched hold of Nimon roughly by the back of his coat collar, Nimon yelped sharply, struggling in frightened alarm.

"You bloody damn bastard," Aedhir said, and without further ado, he whirled Nimon around to face him, clamped his palm mightily against the smaller man's throat and shoved him backwards, forcing him into the shadows of the nearest alley.

"Ca ... Captain Fainne...!" Nimon wheezed. He uttered a breathless, gargled cry as Aedhir slammed him into a wall, smacking the back of his head audibly against the bricks.

"Where is he, you son of a bitch?" Aedhir seethed, leaning near to Nimon's face. "What have you done to him?"

"Captain Fainne, what are you—?" one of the crewmen asked, as they gathered around the mouth of the alleyway, their expressions stricken.

Aedhir drew the an'daga from his holster and shoved the barrel in their direction, giving them all anxious pause. They knew what the pistol was; all of them had seen Aedhir and the other officers partaking of target practice aboard thea'*Maorga*. They knew what it could do ... and they knew Aedhir's skills with it in hand.

"None of you draw any closer," Aedhir said. He found Lupaen among them and the furrow between his brows cleaved more deeply. "Nice to see you on your feet and coherent once again, Mister Moynaghan. Your grief has subsided? The cold night air has done you some good?"

Lupaen blinked at him, abashed, and then stared down at his toes.

"You lying bastard rot," Aedhir said to him. He swept the hands with his eyes. "Consider this termination of your employment—all of you. Find your own damn ways back to Tiralainn, because none of you will be sailing with me. If any you steps foot upon my frigate again, I will see the bloody lot of you shackled and bound for Belgaeran to stand charges of treason—do you understand?"

"Treason, sir?" one of the sailors asked, blanched and wide-eyed with fright.

"Yes, Mister Capraighn, treason. That is what happens when you move to harm a liaison of the Crown." He turned to Nimon, who was still wriggling feebly beneath his hand, his face infused with deep, strangled color, his breath hiccupping weakly around Aedhir's palm. "Did Mister Hodder not tell you that, lads? Offense against Rhyden Fabhcun—the King's ambassador—is as offense against Kierken himself. It is treason to act against him."

"But ... but Captain Fainne, sir, we have done nothing against the Elf," another stammered. "We ... we did nothing..."

"Do you want to testify before the Crown magistrate to that effect, Mister Pickten?" Aedhir snapped, pointing the pistol at the sailor, making him recoil, his eyes flown wide with terror. "Get out of here—all of you, get hence. If I ever see any of you again—if I so much as smell a whiff of your collective stench in the air—I will have you arrested."

They hesitated at the alleyway, frightened and uncertain as they stared at Nimon, watching Aedhir throttle him, listening to him gargle for air.

"I said get your bloody damn asses hence!" Aedhir shouted, and he cocked his thumb, drawing back the doghead of the an'daga with menacing intent. The sailors scattered, ducking back into the crowd along the boardwalk, scampering like scolded mutts.

Aedhir turned his attention to Nimon again, pressing the barrel of the pistol squarely against the man's nose. Nimon's eyes flew wide with terror and there was a soft, whispering sound, the faint spatter of water hitting the ground beneath him as he soaked his breeches.

"Where is he?" Aedhir asked, loosening his grip just enough to let Nimon draw fleeting breath and speak.

"I ... I do not know," Nimon whimpered.

Aedhir rammed him soundly against the wall, battering the cap of his skull against the stones. He shoved the pistol against Nimon's nose again, squashing the bulbous tip beneath the metal barrel. "Tell me where he is," he said. "Tell me what you have done to him, Hodder, or by my breath, you bastard rot, I will splatter your brains across the backside of this wall. Do you think I am lying to you?"

"Nuh-n-no, sir," Nimon said, shaking his head fervently.

"That is good," Aedhir told him. "Because I am not. Tell me where Rhyden is."

"Mongo took him," Nimon said, nearly cross-eyed from staring at the an'daga. "Please ... please, sir, do not! Mongo took him."

"Mongo who?"

"Mongo Boldry—he owns the pub, he ... he..."

Mongo Boldry. Aedhir had been to Capua enough to times to recognize the name, and he felt his heart wrench in sudden dismay. Mongo Boldry was, among other things, a venallicium—a slave dealer—one of the most notorious in all of the Morthir.

"Why did Mongo Boldry take him?" Aedhir asked, though he knew the answer, and it sickened him. "To sell him on the slave market?"

Nimon nodded. "Yuh-yes," he said.

Aedhir leaned forward, his face twisted with rage. "And you bloody helped him do it, you bastard rot."

"I ... I had no choice!" Nimon squealed. His eyes had flooded with tears, and he sniveled. "Please, Captain Fainne, you must believe me. He made me do it! Mongo said he would kill me—I owed him money and he said he would kill me if I did not get it to him!"

"So you bartered Rhyden instead," Aedhir said. "You set him up—tricked me with that pathetic ruse of Lupaen's to get me away from him, and you set him up. That was your remittance."

"Yes," Nimon whimpered.

"How?" Aedhir said. "How did you do it, Hodder?"

"I ... I bought him a drink. Mongo told me to do it, Captain, please, you must believe me. He told me to, and he had the barkeep taint the brimague ... put something in it..."

"Rhyden would as soon drink from the bladder of a diseased ox as accept anything you would offer," Aedhir said.

"I told him I ... I wanted to make ammends," Nimon stammered.

"And he believed this?" Aedhir asked, incredulous. "He believed you?" When Nimon nodded again, Aedhir lowered his head. *Hoah, Rhyden, what in the Bith were you thinking? I told you you had grown too trusting. Damn it all, why did you have to go and prove me right?*

"His nose began to bleed," Nimon said, drawing Aedhir's gaze. "Mongo said that was not supposed to happen, but the drug, made him dizzy, sleepy. He could not fight us and Mongo took him."

"Where?"

"Mongo has a trapdoor in the floor ... the back corner of the pub, and he led the Elf there. The floor opened and he fell. I do not know where he went from there. Mongo did not tell me."

Aedhir knew he could return to the Pauper's Pyre and try to find the trapdoor, to wrench it open if need be and crawl down into whatever fetid sewer Mongon had dumped Rhyden. But he also knew it would be wasted effort.

"He would have brought Rhyden to a catasta," Aedhir said. "He would know I noticed him missing—and that I would come looking for him. He would want to sell Rhyden, get him out of Capua as fast as he could, for as much as he could garner. How many auctions does Mongo Boldry own?"

"I ... I do not..." Nimon began.

"How many?" Aedhir snapped, holding the doghead cocked with the pad of his thumb, his finger tightening slightly against the trigger.

"Five!" Nimon squealed. "Five—he has five!"

Aedhir lowered the pistol from Nimon's face. He released his grasp about Nimon's throat only to snatch him once more by the lapel of his coat. He spun Nimon about and shoved, sending him stumbling toward the mouth of the alley. Nimon blinked at Aedhir over his shoulder, wide-eyed and quaking with terror.

"Take me to them," Aedhir told him, motioning with the pistol.

"All of them?"

"All of them in turn—beginning with the closest—until we find Rhyden," Aedhir said. "And were I you, Mister Hodder, I would pray mightily that we find him, because otherwise, rest assured, you will not draw breath come the dawn."

Nimon stared at him, stricken, whimpering softly. "Sir ... please ... please, sir, I..."

Aedhir clapped his hand against Nimon's shoulder and stepped near to him, pressing the barrel of the an'daga against the small of his back. He leaned toward Nimon's ear. "Go," he said, offering a firm prod to set the man into motion.

"Y-yes, sir," Nimon whispered.

Chapter Nine

ON THE SLAVE BLOCK

"Look at you," a woman's soft voice murmured, drawing Rhyden's mind from the shadows. He stirred slightly when hands settled upon him, drawing him into a clumsy, seated posture. He could feel the hands

moving slowly against him, removing his justicoat and cravat, setting to work on the buttons of his shirt.

Do not ... he wanted to say, but his voice seemed trapped and mute within his throat. He moaned softly, trying to move. His body did not want to obey him, as though the lines between his brain and limbs had all been severed. He faded in and out of dizzy, waning consciousness, only dimly aware as someone undressed him, removing his shirt with deliberate care.

"Look at you," the woman purred again. He felt fingertips slide through his hair, cupping the back of his head, holding him upright, while the other hand slid slowly down his throat and chest.

"So lovely," said the woman, and he felt the hand close gently but firmly between his legs, gripping momentarily before releasing him, moving up to loosen the drawcord of his breeches.

"We will have to cut his hair," he heard another voice say, one he recognized dazedly as that of Mongo Boldry, the man he had met in the Pauper's Pyre.

Rhyden slumped forward, his forehead coming to rest against the woman's shoulder. "Are you mad?" she exclaimed. "Look at it—magnificent. We can fetch an extra thousand dorotus for the mane alone."

"He has friends in high status, Cyriaca," Mongo said sharply. "Friends who will be looking for him, for a man with long blond hair." Rhyden felt Mongo's hand close against his hair, gathering it against his palm as he jerked Rhyden's head back. "We are cutting it."

No, Rhyden wanted to say. He wanted to struggle, to fight back, wrench himself loose of the hands holding him fast, but he could not move. In all of his life, a pair of shears had never touched his hair, a respectful effort on his part to adhere to ancient Gaelge practices most other Elves in Tiralainn had long abandoned.

He heard the coarse whisper of a dagger being jerked roughly between the nape of his neck and Mongo's hand, sawing through the thick sheaf of his hair. He fell forward, his face dropping against the anonymous shoulder again, and for the first time in the length of his days, he felt cold air against the back of his neck, his ears. He could feel the shorn tips of his hair flutter against his cheeks and brow and he groaned, helpless and dismayed.

"Get his clothes off of him," Mongo snapped. "Vespasian will be waiting and we still have to mark him—hurry now."

"Are you meeting Vespasian for the arrangements?" the woman, Cyriaca asked.

"No," Mongo said with a laugh. "No, that bloated bastard. If he wants this one—and he will—he is going to have to earn him at the catasta, bid for him like everyone else."

"He is beautiful," Cyriaca murmured and Rhyden felt her fingertips brush delicately through his cropped hair. "I might buy him myself. I could use something new to straddle."

"So long as you outbid Vespasian out of your own purse, not mine, wife," Mongo said to her with another harsh scrape of laughter. He grabbed Rhyden roughly by the hair again, wrenching his head back. "Lay him back. Tulien, bring me that light. I will mark him."

The entire world listed on its moorings as Rhyden fell back, his shoulders sinking into a thin mattress beneath him. He felt someone hook their fingers beneath the waistband of his breeches, tugging them

down his hips, while another pair of hands took his face, turning his right cheek towards his shoulder. The foul stench of the bedding beneath his face, like stale urine and vomit, filled his nose, and Rhyden moaned, moving his hands in feeble protest.

"He is rousing," said a new voice, a man.

"He swallowed enough venenum to embalm a calf," Mongo said. "He is not rousing. Bring the lamp closer, Tulien. Step lively now."

Rhyden heard a dim scraping sound from beyond his left shoulder. He felt something prick the arch of his cheek, a light but painful sensation, as though a tight cluster of pinpoint had settled into his flesh. There was a light tapping sound and then the pinpricks deepened, sinking into his cheek. It hurt and he tried to turn his face away.

"Hold him still," Mongo said, and someone grasped him firmly by the crown of his head, holding his right cheek toward the fetid mattress. Rhyden heard the tapping again, felt the sting of needles and moaned softly.

"It is alright," he heard the woman, Cyriaca say. "Hush now, it is alright."

What are you doing to me? he thought, and he slipped into unconsciousness again, his mind abandoning him.
* * * *

He stirred again as someone jerked at his hands, drawing his wrists together and lashing them tightly. They sat him up, forcing him roughly from the mattress, and his eyelids fluttered open.

"Please..." he croaked. His vision was blurred, his mind reeling. The left side of his face burned and ached from his cheek to above his brow; when he tried to bring his hands up to brush his fingertips against the sore measure of his flesh, someone grabbed his arms and forced them down again.

"He is awake."

"Hodder said they healed fast. Bring me a syringe."

Rhyden could not see much through the dim haze that seemed to shroud his gaze. He could see vague shadows and silhouettes moving about him, surrounded by faint lantern light. Someone knelt before him; a firm hand closed in his hair, and Rhyden shied.

"Aedhir..." he said softly, his voice hoarse. "Aedhir ... help me..."

He was nude. They had stripped all of his clothes from him, and the air was bitter. He began to shiver and whoever knelt beside him enfolded him in their arms, drawing him against their shoulder. Rhyden tried to struggle against them, to pull away, but his body failed him, leaving him helpless and weak.

"Please..." he said, his eyes drooping closed.

"Give me his hands," he heard Mongo say, and he felt someone clasp him firmly by the bindings at his wrists, pulling his arms toward his left hip. "Hold him still—Thad, lend me your belt."

"It is alright," said the person embracing him, turning their head down toward the crown of his head to

speak, their breath soft against his hair. He recognized the voice, and he pressed his forehead against their shoulder.

"Trejaeran...!" he begged, trying to burrow his face into his friend's coat lapel. "Please ... bidein, please..."

Trejaeran stroked his hair, his lips pressing lightly against Rhyden's head. "It is alright," he said again. Rhyden heard his voice within his mind, quiet and comforting. *Ni eagleann tu, Rhyden. Ta me libh.* Do not be frightened, Rhyden. I am with you.

Rhyden felt something slip about his right arm, just beneath the curve of his bicep. It was a strap of leather, a belt, and it drew taut sharply, making him wince. He opened his eyes again, trying vainly to pull his hands away. He saw Mongo beside him, holding the belt tight with the end clamped between his teeth. He tapped his fingertips against the inner crook of Rhyden's right elbow.

Rhyden saw a wink of lamplight off of a thin sliver of metal in Mongo's other hand; a needle, and he realized. He knew enough of medicines to recognize a hypodermic syringe, and he tried to flinch again.

"No," he said, drawing Mongo's gaze. "No ... do not..."

Mongo smiled. "Hush now," he said as he lowered his eyes to Rhyden's arm again. Rhyden watched, helpless and alarmed as Mongo slid the length of the needle into one of the plump, swollen veins, injecting some sort of amber-colored liquid into him.

"No," he pleaded, making Mongo's smile widen as he spat the belt from his lips and loosened the coil of strap from about Rhyden's arm. Whatever drug Mongo had given him, it had almost instantaneous effect upon Rhyden. He gasped sharply as his head swam violently, his vision reeling. All at once, it felt like he was sprawled upon a raft cast loose in tumultuous seas and he slumped backward, closing his eyes and moaning.

"There you go," Mongo murmured, caressing Rhyden's face with the cuff of his knuckles.

"It is alright," said the person holding Rhyden. It was no longer Trejaeran's voice speaking, and Rhyden opened his eyes dazedly, bewildered. He realized it was not Trejaeran at all; his confused mind had played a cruel trick on him. It was not his friend holding him, but a stranger, a face and voice unknown to him.

"Trejaeran," Rhyden whispered, anguished. He closed his eyes again.

Do not be frightened, Rhyden, he thought he heard Trejaeran say gently, his voice filling Rhyden's fading mind like the warm glow of a sunbeam. *I am with you. I am right here—ta me libh.*

"Get him on his feet," Mongo said. "He is ready and it is nearly midnight. Get him up. It is time to bring him to the catasta."

* * * *

Aigiarn stared in dismay at the crowded slave auction, realizing that they were probably the first Oirat to ever set foot in a catasta without being forced into proffered barter upon its vile blocks. The market was a broad and open expanse of granite decks and tiers, flanked and encircled by towering pillars and arched gateways. Torches burned everywhere, hundreds of them throughout the circumference of the catasta, along with numerous bonfires around which people gathered against the cold night air. The din of

thousands of voices overlapping was deafening, and Aigiarn shied near to Toghrul, pressing her shoulder against his, her eyes round and wary.

She was stricken to realize that such a place, this filthy and fetid den, had been the destination of so many of her people. The four meager tribes beneath her rule were all that remained of the twenty-seven southern races of the Oirat that had existed in Dobun's ancient times. Unforgiving winters, summer droughts and Khahl massacres had seen countless of them dead; more still than this had been abducted and forced into slavery throughout the Morthir. Aigiarn rescued them whenever she could; Oirat slaves discovered in the Khahl's Taiga region to the north, or neighboring realms like Ebesun and Lydia were liberated and lived among them again in the tribal aysils, but the indelible mark of their forced servitude and suffering was left upon them, this horrible and wretched fate left in ink upon their faces.

Slaves were marked with tattoos covering the left side of their cheek and brow in the colors and symbols of the venalicium and auction house from which they were sold. These marks identified their social status to the rest of the empire. Toghrul's wife, Maidar ... one of Aigiarn's dearest friends ... had once been a slave. Toghrul had rescued her, bringing her among his Kerait tribe, and it always broke Aigiarn's heart to behold the twisted, indigo stain upon Maidar's face, like a gnarled and grasping hand reaching out from her hairline, enfolding her eye in tattooed fingers.

She could see this same mark now on the slaves led onto the auction blocks and realized for the first time that this must be the catasta that Maidar had been brought to as a young woman, the market where she had been bartered for and sold like livestock, her beauty marred with the cruel, blue mark.

Yeb had brought them to this terrible place. It had not been their original destination; at first, Yeb had led them from the waterfront toward a tavern he said he had watched the Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun enter with his friend. Yeb had lingered at the pub long enough to satisfy himself that the pair had made themselves comfortable and intended to stay awhile, and then he had returned to the piers to find Aigiarn and Toghrul.

As he had led the way along the crowded, narrow streets towards the tavern, all at once, Yeb had come to a clumsy, stumbling halt. He had buckled forward, his brows pinched, his fingertips pressed against his brow as though he felt sharp pain.

"Yeb!" Aigiarn had exclaimed, reaching for him.

"What is it? What is wrong?" Toghrul had asked in alarm.

Yeb had shrugged away from them, holding up his palm to keep them at bay. "We ... we cannot go this way," he whispered, his eyes closed, his brows still knitted.

"What?" Aigiarn asked, confused and alarmed. "Yeb, what has happened? Tell us what is wrong."

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "We cannot go this way," he said again. "This is not the path we are supposed to follow."

Toghrul and Aigiarn exchanged bewildered glances. "But this is the way you said they came, bugu Yeb," Toghrul said. "You said the man ... Rhyden Fabhcun ... came this way, that he and his friend, the Median went into a tavern together."

"That is where my eyes would lead us," Yeb said. He gasped sharply, hooking his fingers against his brow. "But my mind would see us led elsewhere. There is a voice within me ... it is telling me this is not

our path."

"Ogotai says this is the wrong way?" Aigiarn asked.

Yeb shook his head. He gasped again, and all at once, his nose began to bleed, a sudden torrent rushing from his nose. His hands darted to his face, and Aigiarn cried out.

"Toghrul, he is bleeding!" Aigiarn thrust her fingertips beneath the collar of her del, jerking loose her underlying wool scarf from about her throat. She went to Yeb, pressing one hand against his shaved, smooth temple and using the other to hold the wadded scarf against his face.

"Bugu Yeb, please, what has happened? Are you hurt?" Toghrul said, placing his hands against Yeb's shoulders.

"It is not Ogotai's voice I hear," Yeb told them, his voice muffled by the wool. "It ... it is another. Something powerful."

Yeb had fallen into a trancelike state after this. He had guided them through Capua on foot with an unwavering familiarity that was uncanny and inexplicable. He did not speak to them; if they asked questions of him, he responded in quiet murmurs and inarticulate grunts, as though he focused all of his attention and concentration on the new voice within him that beckoned to him and drew him along. Aigiarn had never seen Yeb like this before, and she was worried for him. It was not until they had found their way to the catasta, passing through the city's dank ghettos far from the waterfront that Yeb had seemed to regain some of his senses, his wits about him.

"Why are we here?" Aigiarn asked him as they stood in the marketplace, huddled together in the throng like baby rabbits torn from their clutch.

"I do not know," Yeb replied. "But this is where we are supposed to be. This is where it meant for us to come."

"It?" Aigiarn said. "What was it? What happened to you, Yeb? Was it Temu somehow, calling upon both of the ongons?"

Yeb shook his head. "I do not believe so," he said. "Though I am certain that the voice would not have been able to reach me if I had not given my ongon to Temu's care for tonight. Ogotai would have tried to protect me from it."

"Protect you?" she asked. "From what, Yeb?"

He looked at her. "An endur, I think." Endurs were sky spirits, the sulds of those whose lives had been so deserving and blessed that they would never need to know rebirth. They were the most powerful of all the nature spirits, except for the Tengri themselves, and the elementals. Endurs were considered strong, beneficial spirits. Shamans often prayed for their aid during ceremonies and rituals that proved too much to ask of their own utha sulds.

"But it hurt you..." Aigiarn said.

"My pain came from my own inability to contain its might, not any effort of the endur," Yeb said. "This one is very powerful, and its voice is very urgent. Shamans usually beseech endurs, not channel them. Only the strongest among us have ever dared to ... I certainly have not. It came to me, Aigiarn ... came

through me ... made me channel it. I have never felt the likes of it in my life."

"It brought you here ... us here," Aigiarn said. "But it did not tell you why?"

"Its purpose was to bring us here," Yeb said. "I would assume the reasons why will become apparent to us if we are patient."

* * * *

They clustered around one of the bonfires together, Aigiarn, Toghrul, Yeb and the ten Kelet guards who had accompanied them. They stood there for a long time, watching as one by one, slaves were presented upon the catasta block nearest them, and subsequently sold among the crowd. The slaves were led to auction stripped of their clothes and dignities, their faces marked with tattoos, their hands lashed together before them. Some sold for as little as three hundred dorotus; others commanded higher barters of two and three thousand coins. Aigiarn felt sad and sickened to watch the endless parade of men, women and children. Boys Temuchin's age were dragged, wide-eyed and frightened to the blocks and bid upon; it did not take an extensive imagination to fathom the horrors that awaited these poor, terrified children at the hands of the Torachans who bought them.

She did not want to watch, but could not even close her eyes and escape the abomination, because the eager bidding rang out from all around her. The crowd would erupt in boisterous cheers whenever particularly fine slaves ... strong young men, or lovely young women ... were brought to the blocks; they would jeer and yowl when less desirable were brought forth for their consideration.

They are no better than a pack of wolves turned loose against an injured burlagh pup, Aigiarn thought, repulsed. She abhorred the practice of slavery; it had never been one the Oirat had observed, although their kin peoples to the north, the Khahl adhered to it with great enthusiasm and greedy vigor. She had tried to explain the concept once to Temuchin several years ago, when he had asked her about the tattoo on Maidar's face, and on the cheeks and brows of many rescued slaves among their tribes.

"It is a shameful, terrible thing," she had told him. "Remember this, oyotona. You can buy one thousand men, force them into your service, but they will never match the faith and courage of one who would follow you in his heart. A true leader, Temu ... a man of true greatness ... knows that strength comes not from the size of his army, the breadth of his empire, but from the belief that his people harbor for him. None of us are greater than the love and faith we instill in others. You cannot buy that on an auction block; you cannot whip it into a person's soul. Your father knew this, Temu, as did your ancestor, Dobun."

Toghrul stood beside Aigiarn at the fire, as disgusted and distraught as she was. He knew all too well of the horrors of slavery, not only from Maidar, but also because three of his brothers and two sisters had been abducted many long years ago during a Khahl raid against the Kerait. Toghrul had never seen them again, never learned what had become of them. Memories of these lost but still beloved siblings weighed upon his mind and heart as he stood in the catasta. His anguish and anger were plain to see in his drawn brows, his grim frown. Aigiarn reached for his hand, slipping her gloved fingers through his and settling his palm flush with her own. His gaze had been distant and forlorn; he looked down at her, and his expression softened.

Sometimes Toghrul would still ask her to marry him, even though she refused him as readily now as she had for fourteen years. Sometimes he still came to her at night and made love to her, helping her to forget, if only for a precious little while, about her troubles and heartaches. He would cradle her face in his hands and kiss her, murmuring to her that she was beautiful, and she would let herself believe him.

She did not say anything to him. She brushed her thumb against his knuckles in a gesture that offered more comfort than simple words could ever articulate. He closed his fingers gently against her hand, and Aigiarn found courage in his touch, strength in his grasp.

The crowd began to cheer around them, and Aigiarn and Toghrul turned to look toward the auction block, curious. A tall, lean man had stepped up onto the wooden platform, and he grinned broadly as they howled and applauded, as though greeting a revered hero. He was dressed inauspiciously in a long woolen coat buttoned over his slender frame. His long dark hair, with silver streaks throughout fell down the length of his spine in a thick plait. He greeted the auctioneer with an embrace, like they were fond and familiar acquaintances, and then he turned back to the crowd, holding up his palms to quiet them. When they only cheered all the more, he shook his head and laughed again, flapping his hands.

"Hush now," he said in a loud voice that resounded throughout the expansive square. It took nearly ten minutes for the crowd to settle into a restless semblance of silence, but the man waited patiently for them, smiling all the while.

"My name is Mongo Boldry," the man announced, though to judge by the bellowing cheers that greeted this, no introduction was needed for most among the market patrons. Mongo Boldry waited again until the applause and howls subsided, then walked slowly along the length of the auction block, pacing back and forth as he addressed them.

"Welcome to my catasta," he said. "I know many of you have traveled great distances to be in Capua this evening, and I am pleased that you would make time to visit with my humble market along the way."

More cheers greeted this, and again, Mongo laughed. "I do not often stand on my own blocks," he said, shrugging his shoulders as though offering the mass a confidential token. "I trust such affairs to the capable hands of my auctioneers. My appearances here are usually limited to moments of drunken impetuosity or when I am kissing the powdered ass of some wealthy prospective client."

The crowd erupted in a deafening roar. Aigiarn shied against Toghrul's shoulder reflexively, drawing her hand toward her ear against the din.

"Tonight is something different, my friends," Mongo said. He drew to a halt and faced the crowd, clasping his hands behind his back. "Something exquisite and unique. It is something that has so delighted and pleased me that I would present it myself for your consideration, because I guarantee you this ... you have never seen the likes before in your lives, and you may likely never so again."

An excited murmur rippled through the crowd, making Mongo's smile widen. "Would you like to see it?" he asked. The throng roared out in enthusiastic approval, but Mongo only arched his brow, cupping his hand to his ear. "Would you like to see it?" he shouted out, and again, the crowd screamed in reply.

"Grab your purses then, my friends!" Mongo cried, clapping his hands together. "Barter your wives and pawn all of your jewels, because I tell you none of those will compare. You want to be the envy of your noble neighbors? You want the aristocratic gossip to whirl in your accord? Here is how ... one of a kind in the whole of the empire."

Two large, strapping men stepped onto the catasta block, hauling a slave between them who stumbled in their tow, his hands bound, his head drooped toward the ground, his cropped blond hair tumbled about his face. From this initial, clumsy appearance, there seemed nothing so extraordinary about the slave, and the crowd's applause faltered, their cheers fading into bewildered mutters. People strained upon their tiptoes, craning their chins to glean a better look, whispering to one another, frowning in confusion.

"Just a man," someone said from behind Aigiarn. This observation was picked up by others in the crowd, and soon they were shouting it out at Mongol, their voices angry and sharp.

"Just a man!"

"One of a kind, my bloody ass...!"

"He is just another man!"

"What is so exquisite about that?"

Yeb's hand shot out, seizing Aigiarn firmly by the wrist. His fingers closed against her forcefully enough to make her wince, and when she tried to draw her arm away from him, he did not turn her loose. "Yeb, what are you...?" she asked.

Yeb did not look at her; his gaze was fixed upon the catasta block, his brows drawn. "This is why we are here," he whispered, and Aigiarn blinked, turning back to the slave, her breath stilling beneath her breast.

"Just a man?" Mongo asked, raising his brows. The disapproval of the crowd had not fazed him in the slightest; his grin remained broad and cheery, plastered on his face. He walked to the slave, who slumped in the grasp of his accompanying guards, more unconscious apparently than coherent. The crowd began to boo and jeer, but Mongo shook his head, laughing all the more.

"Just a man?" he asked again. He brushed his fingertips through the slave's hair, drawing it back to reveal his ear. At this, the crowd quieted again, subsiding into bewildered and dumbstruck silence.

The young man's ear tapered along the upper edge into a sharp, distinctive point. Mongo allowed the crowd a long, lingering look and then he nodded to his men, who obligingly forced the slave upright. One of them seized him by the hair and forced his head back so that the crowd could admire his face more clearly, and they forced him to stumble forward, shoving him toward the edge of the platform.

"He is not just a man," Mongo said. "This, my friends, is an Elf. An honest-to-the-Good-Mother, living, breathing Gaeilge Elf from the land of Tiralainn, across the Muir Fuar sea." He did not even give this astonishing revelation time to stoke flurried conversation before he continued. "He is an Elf ... by legend and lore, some of the most flawless and exquisite creatures the Mother Creator ever set upon this Bith. Look at his face ... this pristine face ... and this lean and magnificent form and tell me you do not agree."

Aigiarn stepped away from Toghrul, her eyes flown wide with shock. They had taken him somehow.

Mongo Boldry and his slave traders had taken him, shorn his long hair off and tattooed his face with Mongo's signature blue mark, but it was him. Temu and Yeb had both described his tapered ears to her and there was no question now of the endur's purpose in drawing them to the flesh market. It had been leading them to this man, this Elf upon the slave block.

"Rhyden Fabhcun," she whispered. She felt Toghrul reach for her, his fingers catching against her sleeve.

"Aigiarn, no..." he said, but she shrugged herself loose of his grasp. She began to shove her way through the crowd, trying to get near the platform.

"If this lovely face, this delicious form pleases you, you are in the best of luck, friends," Mongo told the

crowd. "Because he is an Elf ... he can live hundreds of years and look not a day older than he does at this very moment. Centuries, my lords ... a slave not just to you and your whims, but to your children's children's grandchildren's whims besides. And all the while, he will be as striking to behold as he is here upon my block. He will never grow old. His beauty will never fade; his body will never wither. He is an Elf ... he can heal from nearly any injury, his body ... and all of its orifices ... as good as new." He said this last with a lecherous wink that drew yowls of approval from the patrons.

"I challenge the lot of you to name me one man ... one nobilissimus in the entire bloody wide Torachan empire ... with a Gaeilge Elf in his stable!" Mongo shouted. "And if you should claim this prize tonight as your own ... why, then, I challenge you to find me another in the whole of the realm who will ever have another ... because you will not. Elves do not travel from their homeland. You do not know the purses I had to pad to see this one brought to me, but I can tell you this ... there will be no others. He is one of a kind, as unique as he is beautiful."

Aigiarn forced her way to the front of the crowd, shoving herself against the edge of the platform. She looked up at the Elf, wincing as she was jostled and shouldered roughly in the throng.

He is the falcon, Yeb had told her. The one who will lead us to the dragons' lair.

The Elf opened his eyes. The guards still held him firmly, one of them forcing his head back by the hair, but he looked down, his eyes wide and bewildered, his frightened gaze finding Aigiarn's. He stared at her, gasping softly for breath over and over again, and he reached for her with his bound hands, his fingers splaying toward her, trembling. She met his gaze, stricken, realizing his fear, his helplessness and confusion.

"We will open the bidding at one thousand dorotus," Mongo declared. "Though I tell you, my wife has taken a fancy to certain portions of his anatomy ... and some more so than others ... so if he draws no more than this, I will raise it a rodne and call him hers!"

The crowd laughed and the Elf shrugged his shoulder, stumbling. The guards tried to catch him, tightening their grips, but he staggered away from them, crumpling to his knees before Aigiarn on the platform. He raised his face, reaching for her again, his eyes glassy and dazed.

"Please ... help me..." he breathed, and then the guards seized him roughly, jerking him to his feet once more. They dragged him back from the edge of the platform, and Aigiarn watched him slump between them, his head dropping toward his chest, his consciousness waning.

"Do I hear one thousand dorotus?" Mongo called out to the crowd.

"One thousand," Aigiarn said. She turned to the venalicius as he blinked at her, somewhat startled. Women did not typically patronize flesh auctions, much less one that he likely considered an ignorant barbarian, and she met his gaze evenly, her brows drawing together. "One thousand dorotus."

"I have one thousand, then," Mongo said after a long moment, nodding politely at Aigiarn. "Shall we go from here, friends?"

"Twelve hundred!" someone shouted out.

"Thirteen!" called another.

The bidding continued from there, dragging onward for more than an hour. When the bartered price

reached fifteen thousand dorotus and continued soaring higher from there, a majority of the bidders fell silent one by one and each in turn, until at last, with nineteen thousand offered, it was down to only Aigiarn and a solitary nobilissimus.

The nobleman sat in a private booth framed by plush draperies along the edge of the market's circumference. He was rotund, disgusting in his girth, with a powdered wig and garish clothing. His face was masked beneath heavily applied layers of zinc paint and cosmetics, shrouded further by heavy shadows cast by the drapes around him. He was surrounded by a bevy of attendants and slaves, and seemed rather bored by the whole affair. He drank glass after glass of wine and nibbled on wedges of cheese or pickled figs, flapping his hands occasionally at one of his heralds ... a man marked with the tattoo of Mongo's catastas on his face ... to prompt him to offer a bid in his stead.

His face was apparently known to the venalicium, Mongo Boldry, because Mongo addressed him by name ... Lord Gaius Leonius Vespasian. Vespasian was obviously the sort to whom money was no object; he had settled his gaze upon the Elf and coveted him as one might a bauble in a pawn shop, and he meant to have him. For every price Aigiarn would offer, he would raise her one hundred dorotus or two, until she was shaking with frustration and fury.

Toghrul, Yeb and the Kelet had come to stand with her, but Aigiarn took little notice of them. She spared dark glowers toward Vespasian in his opulent little corner every so often, but otherwise kept her gaze fixed on Rhyden Fabhcun. There were no bruises or cuts on him that she could see; no sign that he had been beaten, but she knew they had done something to force him into such quiet submission. He slumped, piteous, unresisting and mostly unconscious between his captors. The winter night was bitter and the guards did not hold him near enough to any bonfire to benefit much from the proffered warmth. The poor Elf shuddered miserably, nearly blue with cold.

"I believe my Lord Vespasian has offered nineteen thousand dorotus," Mongo said, turning to look down at Aigiarn. It was difficult to determine which surprised him more, her fire or her relentless determination. He kept smiling at her, a wry little hook to the corner of his mouth as though he admired her. "If the good lady from Ulus would see it raised?"

"Twenty," Aigiarn said.

Vespasian's hands fluttered slightly from beneath the edge of shadows in his corner. "My Lord Vespasian calls twenty-one, Mister Boldry," his herald said.

"Twenty-two," Aigiarn snapped. She was exasperated with this little game the nobilissimus would play, the fun he was obviously enjoying at her expense. She felt Toghrul's hand close against her sleeve and knew why; she had given him ten thousand dorotus to buy supplies for the Oirat in Leucas, which left her only twenty to barter with. She did not care. Temuchin had told her they would need thirty. Toghrul had said they could make do with twenty, but he had been wrong. Twenty would not be enough, just as Temu had promised.

Vespasian's hands twitched again, flapping in the air, and his herald said, "Twenty-three."

"Aigiarn," Toghrul said quietly.

She did not turn to him. "Twenty-four."

"Aigiarn, stop," Toghrul whispered.

"He is the falcon," she hissed, jerking her arm away from him. "He can read the map, Toghrul. Turn me loose."

Vespasian slapped at his stomach with his pale, fat fingers, the expanse of his gut straining against the confines of his waistcoat buttons. The herald glanced at him over his shoulder and then turned to Mongo once more. "Twenty-five."

"Twenty-seven," Aigiarn countered, her hands closing into fists.

Vespasian pawed at the air; torchlight winked and flashed off of the gold rings encrusting his fingers. "Twenty-eight," said his herald.

"Thirty thousand," Aigiarn said, and she heard Toghrul sigh in frustrated dismay. He stepped back from her, his brows furrowing, folding his arms across his chest.

Aigiarn expected Vespasian's herald to challenge her offer, just as he had done all along. She steeled herself for it, unable to breathe, waiting for the call of *thirty-one*, hoping it would not come.

Thirty has to be enough, she thought. Temu said it would be and I believe in him. I believe in what Yesugei told him. It has to be enough.

After a long moment's silence, she turned to Vespasian's corner. Mongo looked in that direction as well. The crowd began to mutter, a low, uncertain din stirring among them.

"My Lord Vespasian, thirty thousand dorotus have been offered," Mongo called out. "Do you raise it, sir?"

Vespasian's hands did not move; they rested limply against the swell of his paunch. His slaves looked among one another, bewildered, and his herald approached the draperies slowly, cautiously.

"Lord Vespasian, do you raise it to thirty-one?" the herald asked. When again, the nobilissimus did not reply, the herald reached out, poking him hesitantly in the arm. At his prodding, Vespasian moved, his entire, portly frame listing sideways in his seat. All at once, he collapsed, pitching off of his chair and crashing face-first onto the ground, toppling a small table beneath him, sending glasses tumbling, plates of fruit and cheese spilling. A collective cry rushed through the crowd; another followed as Vespasian's slaves struggled valiantly to turn him over, only to discover the nobleman's swollen tongue protruding from his lips, his eyes bulging forth from his skull in a frantic, unblinking stare.

He had choked to death on one of the figs or wedges of cheese he had been nibbling on all evening. His alabaster cosmetics and the shadows of the overhanging draperies had kept the infusion of color in his face from view as he had suffocated. His herald had unfortunately misinterpreted his flapping gestures for aid as prompts to continue bidding, and as a result, Vespasian had likely sat in his chair, helpless and strangling for the better part of five minutes before asphyxiating.

"He ... he is dead...!" exclaimed one of the slaves, staring towards Mongo. "Lord Vespasian is dead!"

Mongo arched his brow. "Is that not a shame," he remarked, dryly. He turned to Aigiarn. "I hope you have thirty thousand dorotus to your name, my dear."

"I am not your dear," Aigiarn told him. She reached into her bogcu and pulled out her swollen coin purse. "And yes, I have thirty thousand dorotus." She turned to Toghrul and thrust out her palm

expectantly. He frowned, but did not say anything as he reached into his own pouch and presented her with the remaining ten thousand dorotus from the sale of the gyrfalcons.

Mongo genuflected at the edge of the platform, and Aigiarn watched as he slowly, deliberately counted out all of the coins. He glanced at her when he was finished. "Tell me, how did a little Ulus lass such as yourself happen upon this kind of coinage?"

"By more honest means than you will likely ever know, venaliciium," she said, her brows furrowing.

Mongo laughed, shaking his head. He stood, tucking the money into a large pouch on his belt. "Gaius Vespasian is dead. In my ledger, you have done me a great service, my lady, no matter how they came into your purse." He pressed his fingertips against his shirt and affected a courteous bow for her. He nodded to his guards. "They will tend to your documents for you. There are some certificates you must sign for legal ownership. You can affix your mark, can you not?"

"Of course I can," Aigiarn said, her frown deepening.

"Of course," Mongo said, and he smiled at her as though he fancied himself in love. He shook his head again, chuckling. "Congratulations, then, my lady," he said, and he swept his hand demonstratively toward Rhyden Fabhcun. "You have just bought yourself an Elf."

Chapter Ten

DEAD ENDS AND RUN-AROUNDS

It was nearly two o'clock in the morning by Aedhir's watch as Nimon led him to the third of Mongo Boldry's catastas. The first two auctions had been packed with patrons, the bidding on slaves along the dozens of blocks lining the market squares face-paced and fervent. There had been no sign of Rhyden, and everyone Aedhir had asked or bribed with pences had told him they had seen no sign of either Mongo Boldry or an Elf.

This third catasta was the largest so far, an expansive square of stone tiers framed by columns and archways that sprawled across nearly two full city blocks. More than forty individual bartering platforms were erected throughout the market, and the crowd stood jammed shoulder-to-shoulder around each.

"This is the largest of Mongo's auctions," Nimon said, turning to look at Aedhir. Aedhir had forced him in step ahead of him the entire way, keeping one hand firmly planted against the man's coat, lest he entertain thoughts of darting, and holding the barrel of the an'daga shoved against his kidney. "And the finest of them."

"What?" Aedhir asked, and he frowned, his fingers tightening against Nimon's collar. "Then why in the bloody duchar did you not take me here first, Hodder?"

Nimon's eyes widened. "You ... but you ... you said bring you to the closest one first, Captain," he said.

Aedhir glowered at him, his fury suddenly stoked anew and in full. He leaned toward Nimon and hissed in his ear. "I ought to just shoot you now, Hodder, you stupid rot, and do the Bith a service."

Nimon quaked in his shoes. "But ... but, Captain," he whimpered. "You ... you said..."

"I know what I bloody said," Aedhir snapped, and he gave Nimon a hearty shove forward. "Move, Hodder."

Aedhir forced Nimon to cleave a path for them through the crowd as they made their way toward the main platform. Aedhir had learned more about catastas and the flesh market industry in the last three hours than he had ever wanted to know, including the fact that the premier slaves, the ones who went for the highest prices, were sold from each catasta's main block. Wealthy noblemen from throughout the empire flocked to these platforms; private booths appointed with draperies and comfortable seats were provided for them, along with libations and food for their enjoyment as they bartered. Mongo Boldry surely would have offered Rhyden for sale from one of these; in addition to being young, healthy and handsome, Rhyden was a Gaeilge Elf ... a rarity in Torach that would make him a prize to own.

Even if Boldry had not sold Rhyden from a main block, this area of the markets also served as the place where owners came to claim their purchases, and where they signed writs of sale and titles of ownership for their newly acquired slaves. The entrances and exits to the catasta catacombs were here, too; networks of tunnels that ran beneath the entire city of Capua. It was into one of these catacombs that the trapdoor in the Pauper's Pyre undoubtedly led and through this subterranean system that Rhyden had been smuggled to market. In the catacombs beneath each catasta, slaves were kept in large cells barred with iron gates until their turn to be led to the platforms. If Rhyden had been sold, someone here at the tables behind the main block would have known of it, would have seen him, and tendered documents selling him.

Every slave brought for bidding had been tattooed with a grim, hooking mark, like an indigo talon wrapping about their left brow and cheek; the symbol of Mongo Boldry's catastas. As Aedhir looked around now and watched more slaves led to the platforms, their hands bound, their bodies nude, their faces bearing this blue signature, his frown only deepened.

"If Mongo Boldry has marked Rhyden's face, I will mark yours with my fist, Hodder," he said quietly.

"It is not my fault," Nimon whined. "Do you think I would willingly see this done to anyone? Please, I have tried to tell you. He made me do it. Mongo said he..."

"Shut your mouth," Aedhir growled.

There was a long line of patrons waiting at the mercator vending tables to complete their certificates and claim their slaves. Aedhir shoved Nimon ahead of him, plowing a path through the throng. He ignored the indignant yelps and angry cries their passage drew and when he reached the first table, he pushed Nimon aside, keeping his hand firmly against the scruff of the man's lapels.

The mercator working the table looked up at Aedhir, raising his brow and twisting his face as though offended by Aedhir's rude approach. "There is a line, sir," he said. "Kindly find your place in it."

Aedhir leaned across the table toward the man. "I am in my place," he said, his brows furrowed. "I am looking for Mongo Boldry."

"You have not found him, then," the mercator said. "Master Boldry's offices are found at the Aquilonius Ganea on Fraxinus. He accepts visitors by appointment at his convenience."

"I do not want an appointment. I want to see him," Aedhir said. He had tucked the an'daga into its holster beneath his coat, and curled his hand into a fist, striking it against the table with enough force to

jostle the mercator's stacks of papers. "I understand he has an Elf for sale tonight."

The mercator offered no indication in his face that he was aware of this; he merely blinked at Aedhir, his brow yet raised. "There are no Elves here," he said. "If exotic fares please you, perhaps you would care to step outside to the main platform. I believe we have some adolescent boys from Teutoni that are due for bidding within the hour, if you..."

"I am not looking to buy a slave," Aedhir said. "I am looking for an Elf ... my friend. His name is Rhyden Fabhcun. He was taken tonight against his will. Mongo Boldry took him. He is a victim of raptio, and I mean to have him back."

"Raptio?" the mercator said, blinking innocently, as if this term was completely unknown to him. By now, several large, brawny guards had taken notice of Aedhir and walked slowly toward the table, their large hands closed, their faces set in disagreeable scowls.

"Do not play stupid with me, you rot," Aedhir told the mercator. "Raptio ... abduction. Mongo Boldry drugged my friend and took him."

"My good sir," said the mercator, smiling at Aedhir. "Master Boldry runs a perfectly legal operation at this, and all of his catastas. If your friend has indeed been victimized in such fashion, I assure you Master Boldry played no part in such treachery. He..."

"Where is he?" Aedhir shouted, furious beyond reason. He was tired and frustrated by the same paltry, yammering excuses, the guileless stares, the proffered ignorance. He slammed his fist against the table again, his eyes ablaze. "He stole my friend ... Rhyden Fabhcun, a Gaeilge Elf." He whirled about to the patrons behind him and cried out loudly. "I will give twenty thousand Tiralainnian marks to anyone who can tell me where he is! Twenty thousand marks ... one of you must have seen him, I know it! Blond hair, brown eyes ... a Gaeilge Elf!"

"There have been no Elves for sale on these blocks tonight, sir," said a voice from behind Aedhir. He turned and found a man standing behind him, a man with long dark hair, streaked with silver, tied back in a heavy braid. He smiled at Aedhir, his brows raised sympathetically. "I have been here since before dusk, sir. If they had brought an Elf to the blocks, I would have known of it, I am certain."

Aedhir blinked at him. He glanced at the approaching guards, who had drawn to halts close at hand, keeping their gazes fixed upon him. "You are certain?" he asked. "Elves look like men, except their ears taper. You might not know otherwise. Rhyden is tall ... slightly more so than me, with blond hair to his waist."

"I am sorry, friend," the man said. "I have never seen an Elf, but I have also not seen any man with blond hair to his waist upon the platforms." When he realized Aedhir's stricken, anguished expression, he took him gently by the arm and led him away from the table. "He was taken here in Capua?"

"Yes," Aedhir said. "Tonight, no more than three hours ago, from a pub, one of Mongo Boldry's taverns, the Pauper's Pyre."

"There is a praetura of the Empire here in Capua, an office of civil justice," the man said. "Quintas Camillus Vitus serves as propraetor, I believe, and keeps a regiment of praetorian guards on staff. You should go to him. He could help you since your Elf friend was taken from here in the city. Vitus acts in the Imperial Consul's stead and the Good Mother knows the wretches here would not tell you anything if they knew."

"The bloody rot they would not ... turn loose of me," Aedhir said, shrugging his arm away from the man's hand. He turned and glowered at the mercator, the guards, moving to step toward the tables again.

"Please," the man told him in a low voice, catching his coat sleeve again. "You will not find any answers from them, my friend, no matter how many coins you offer, or threats you tender. Mongo Boldry pays them far too well for their silence, service ... and their loyalty. You will only see yourself in trouble ... or in jail."

"How do you know so much of it ... 'friend?'" Aedhir asked, jerking his arm free once more.

"Because like you, I am searching for someone, too," the man said, and Aedhir looked at him in surprise. "My wife was taken from our village, Melos west of here three weeks ago. I have followed the flesh traders to this forsaken place ... I heard that Boldry has her, that he would barter her at this catasta."

"I ... I am sorry," Aedhir said softly, his rage and aggravation fading at the sudden, melancholy cast of the man's face. "Forgive me. I ... I am..."

"It is alright. I understand," the man said. He clapped his hand against Aedhir's shoulder. He nodded his chin in farewell and began to walk toward the gateway leading out upon the auction terraces once more. "I would try the praetura were I you," he said. "Good luck to you, sir. I hope you find this Elf friend of yours."

Aedhir stared after him, stricken and silent, watching him shoulder his way through the crowd. Just as he thought to call after the man, to thank him, to offer him pences for his trouble, he realized to his dismay that he had lost sight of Nimon Hodder. He had turned loose of Hodder's coat when he had lost his temper at the mercator, and as the man with the long braid had drawn him away from the tables, Hodder had apparently seized full advantage of the moment, and Aedhir's frustrated distraction.

"Hodder?" Aedhir called out, his brows drawing together again. He whirled about in a broad circle, his hands closing into fists, but Hodder had long since bolted into the crowd and disappeared. "Nimon Hodder!"

There was no sign of the man anywhere, and Aedhir sucked in a rueful, hissing breath between his clenched teeth as he began to shove his way through the crowd, searching vainly, desperately for him. *Damn it all, he thought. I knew I should have shot that rotted little bastard from the first.*

He did not know what to do. He was exhausted and frightened, alone in a city he was only vaguely familiar with ... in a seedy quadrant of ghettos he had never visited before in his life. He could get back to the wharf easily enough by hiring a hansom, but he did not want to go back to the ship, not yet.

Rhyden is out here somewhere. He is here and I cannot leave without him. He saved my life, my career, my honor. I am not leaving him to this.

He did not know what to do. He drew to a halt, being jostled and shouldered rudely by passers-by in the crowd. He forked his fingers through his hair, noticing for the first time that his hands were trembling, a combination of chill, frustration and fear.

He did not know where Mongo Boldry's other two catastas were, and he knew the likelihood of finding his unwilling guide, Nimon Hodder, was fairly slim. It would be a moot point to even try and find them, he

realized. Enough time had passed, and surely Rhyden had already been sold, wherever he had been brought. The dark-haired man had made a good point ... it was obvious none of Mongo's lackeys were going to talk to him, no matter how much he pleaded or bartered.

Then what do I do? Aedhir thought, despondent. *Where can I go?* Every moment that passed was one in which any number of unfathomable horrors might befalling Rhyden; being abducted and sold was atrocity enough, but to think of the grim fates that likely awaited him in the hands of some nobilissimus slave owner was enough to wrench Aedhir's stomach into a pained and desperate knot.

The man had suggested that Aedhir go to the Capuan praetura, speak with the propraetor and his guards and see what, if anything they could do, and Aedhir realized that was probably the best solution. Rhyden was an ambassador to the Torachan Emperor in Cneas; surely, those officials acting in the Emperor's stead would help him somehow.

In his mind, Aedhir knew this was the most rational choice, but in his heart, he remained distraught and torn.

Rhyden, where are you? he thought, closing his eyes in the middle of the crowd. It was a ridiculous effort, he knew; Rhyden had said he thought the sight was rekindling in his mind, that he might possess the gift once more, but Aedhir certainly did not. He had never understood the workings of Elfin rapport and empathy, but he was willing to try anything if it meant he might find Rhyden.

Rhyden, please, he thought. *Tell me where you are. Reach out to me somehow. Tell me how to find you.*

Aedhir lowered his face toward the ground and pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb. If he had honestly expected to elicit some semblance of reply, Rhyden's voice within his head saying something like, *Hey, Aedhir, over here, to your left,* then he might have been more disappointed when nothing came of his attempts.

This is my fault, he thought in dismay. *All of this ... my fault. I am the one who hit Vaughan Ultan, left Tiralainn early ... hired Nimon Hodder to my crew. It is my fault the ship was damaged in the storm, and my fault that this has happened to Rhyden. He saved my life when the mast broke; he saved my reputation, my Naval commission when he wrote to Kierken. He has been a better friend to me in three weeks than most I have known for many long years ... and here is how I have repaid him. I have brought all of this upon him.*

He turned in a circle, sweeping the crowded catasta with his eyes. *Rhyden, please,* he begged within his mind. *Call out to me. Use your sight, your voice ... say my name. Give me a sign ... something, anything ... please, I am begging you.*

A woman suddenly rushed headlong against him, plowing into his chest and sending him staggering back, his eyes flown wide in start. She had come out of nowhere, bursting through the crowd as though she had a pack of slavering wolves nipping at her heels. "Hoah, now...!" Aedhir cried out, stumbling.

The woman clung to the lapels of his coat and stared up at him, her eyes enormous and frightened. "You are looking for the Elf," she said, her voice little more than a tremulous, hiccupping gasp.

She was beautiful, with large, round blue eyes that seemed to swallow the delicate confines of her face. The left side of her face bore the indigo tattoo of Boldry's catastas that was now familiar to Aedhir. She was tall but very slender, her fragile, lanky form nude, and Aedhir could feel the pressure of her small

breasts as she pressed herself against him. There was nothing sensual or suggestive in the effort however; it struck him as more frantic and childlike, as if she hoped to wriggle beneath the overlapping great coats he wore and hide.

It was not her appearance, her beauty or her nudity that startled the breath from Aedhir, although under ordinary circumstances, they might have. It was her words, and the frantic imperative in her voice: *You are looking for the Elf.*

"Yes," Aedhir said, taking her by the shoulders. She was freezing, her lips nearly blue with cold, and she shuddered against him. "Have you seen him? A man just told me he has not been on the block all night."

"That man was Mongo Boldry," she whispered, her long fingers coiled in tight fists about his coat flaps. "And he lied to get you to leave."

"What?" Aedhir said, his brows furrowing in sudden fury. He looked up into the crowd, but it was no use. Like Hodder, the man with the dark braid ... Mongo Boldry ... was long gone. "That son of a bitch...!"

"Please, I have seen the Elf. Brown eyes, blond hair ... they cut it short, but that is what they called him, an Elf."

"They cut his hair?" Aedhir gasped, stunned by his own ignorance, cursing himself that this had not yet occurred to him. "Mother Above, and I have been..."

"They said he was an Elf. I saw his ears," the woman said. She looked frantically over her shoulder, her long, yellow hair whipping against Aedhir's chin. She drew closer to him and rose onto her tiptoes to hiss in his ear: "Please, I saw who bought him. I saw them at the mercators' tables when they brought me to the blocks. I heard them say where they were taking him."

"Where?" Aedhir said, tightening his grip upon her shoulders. He shook her without meaning to; he was frightened and enraged. "Tell me where he is!"

"Please, I..." the woman began, and then she cried out miserably as a large fist closed in her hair, broad fingers knotting against the cap of her skull. She staggered away from Aedhir's grasp as an enormous man, his face all but obscured by a thick, bushy growth of beard yanked her back.

"Get your damn rotted hands off my property, mister," the bearded man said to Aedhir, his bushy, thick brows pinching together. He turned to the woman and before Aedhir could even draw breath to protest, he slapped her roughly, letting the blade of his palm fly against her cheek, rocking her head back on her slender neck and sending her sprawling to the ground. "Rotted bitch!" the man shouted at her, closing his hands into fists. "Run from me, will you? Never again, by my bloody damn breath!"

He reared back his fist, meaning the strike the woman again, and she cowered, drawing her hands toward her face. Just as the man's hand swung downward, Aedhir's shot out, and he closed his fingers firmly about the man's thick wrist, staying him in mid-swing.

"Hit her again, and you will answer to me," Aedhir said, as the man blinked at him, his expression caught somewhere between incredulous and infuriated. He outweighed Aedhir by a good forty pounds, if not more, and he stared at Aedhir's hand, his fingers about his wrist as though amazed.

"Get your hand off of me," he said to Aedhir, moving to jerk his arm free.

Aedhir tightened his grip; he was tall and relatively lean, but the bulk of his form was nothing but hardened and well-accustomed muscles. The other man might have been bigger, but Aedhir was stronger, and he held him fast. "This woman has information I need," he told the bearded man. "A friend of mine was taken tonight, and she has seen him. I must speak with her."

The bearded man snorted with laughter. "This is no woman," he said, and he turned his head, harking spittle and spraying the woman with it. "This is an Achaian paelex ... a premium whore trained in the noble brothels of Euboea." His gaze returned to Aedhir, his mouth twisting into a frown. "And she is my property. I had only just now finished signing the writs and certificates when the rotted little bitch twisted loose of her bindings and bolted."

Aedhir caught sight of five guards shoving their way through the crowd, approaching them, alarmed by the ruckus. They would recognize his face; if the man with the braid had indeed been Mongo Boldry, he would have made his guards fully aware of Aedhir's presence and his state of unwelcome at the auction.

When they reached him, they would likely escort him from the premises, and none too gently in the process, Aedhir was certain. He would lose the woman ... along with any hope he might have of finding Rhyden, and he turned to the bearded man, speaking quietly, quickly.

"She has information I need," he said, releasing his grip against the man's wrist.

"You want to speak with her? You have to buy her, then," the man said.

Aedhir blinked at him, startled. "I do not want to buy her," he said. "My friend is missing and she has seen him here, at this catasta tonight. She saw who bought him. Please, let me speak with her."

He reached for the woman, offering his hand to help her rise to her feet, but the bearded man clapped his palm against Aedhir's shoulder, forcing him back. "I said, if you want to speak with my paelex, you have to buy her," he said.

The guards were almost upon them; Aedhir realized he had no choice. In less than a minute, they would be reaching for him. Their gazes were already fixed upon him, their fists closed as they waded through the throng, their brows furrowed. He glanced down at the woman and found her huddled against the ground, staring up at him with large, pleading eyes.

"How much?" he asked, reaching into his coat pocket for the coin purse Rhyden had given him earlier in the night.

"I might part with her for five thousand dorotus," said the man.

"You might?" Aedhir said, meeting his gaze. "Or you will?"

"For five, I might," the man replied, folding his arms across his chest. "For ten, I will."

"Will you accept Tiralainnian marks?"

The man smirked at him, nearly unseen beneath the messy scruff of his beard and mustache. "I will accept twelve thousand Tiralainnian marks, yes."

Aedhir frowned at him. He was tempted simply to plow his knuckles into the man's nose, snatch the girl and run, but he knew such efforts would be futile ... and that he had no time left to barter. "Fine," he said,

and he opened the coin purse, shelling out the gold marks. He deposited them each against the man's outstretched, awaiting palm, twelve one-thousand mark coins.

He had just presented the last pence when he felt a heavy hand clamp firmly against his shoulder. "Is there a problem here, my lords?" one of the guards asked.

The bearded man smiled broadly at Aedhir. "No problem at all, lads," he said. He closed his fingers about the coins and for one despairing moment, Aedhir thought he would deny the sale, take Aedhir's money ... and the girl ... and leave him to the guards. Fortunately, he proved neither quite so clever or greedy. "Just a little bartering among gentlemen, that is all. I sold him this rot bitch your mercatos cheated me on at the blocks. We were just on our way to the tables to transfer the titles to his name."

"Is that so?" asked the guard, leaning near enough so Aedhir could feel the hot press of his breath against his ear.

"Yes, it is," Aedhir replied, shrugging his shoulder and dislodging the guard's hand. "So kindly remove your rotted paw from me, you bastard." He looked down at the woman and held out his hand again. "Get up."

She nodded, wide-eyed and shivering. She slipped her fingers against his palm, and her grip was like ice as he drew her, stumbling to her feet.

"Do not run from me," Aedhir told her, and she met his gaze, nodding her head up and down.

"I ... I will not, my lord," she said.

The bearded man guffawed at this. "Lying rot bitch," he said, and the girl cringed, shying closer to Aedhir. "The best of luck to you, mister, with that one," the man said to Aedhir. "She is more trouble than she is worth, if you ask me."

* * * *

"What is your name?" Aedhir asked the young woman.

He had hired a hansom to take them to the praetura, and they sat together on a narrow, thinly upholstered bench as the coach jostled and rolled along. Quintas Vitus served as the equivalent of the constable of Torach, and Aedhir hoped that he might beg the propraetor's aid in finding Rhyden.

"Tacita Metella, my lord," the woman said quietly, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes upon her clasped fingers. Aedhir had given her Rhyden's great coat to wear, although the heavy folds of wool nearly engulfed her slim figure. Aedhir had worn two sets of knee-high stockings beneath his breeches to protect his legs from the cold; he had offered her the thicker of the pairs to put on her feet.

"Tell me what you know of my friend, Tacita Metella," he said.

She did not lift her gaze from her hands. "A woman bought him," she said. "A woman from Ulus. She wore a fur-trimmed hat and a long coat. There were others in her company, a group of twelve men, all dressed similarly. They were Oirat, of the southern Ulusian territory, Nuqut."

"Oirat," Aedhir said, and he frowned, remembering the peculiar panhandler they had encountered outside of the harbormaster's office, the one who had shown Rhyden some sort of charcoal rubbing Rhyden had been convinced came from an ancient Abhacan artifact. "Was there a man among them in a

yellow woolen vest, long-hemmed, below his hips?"

Tacita nodded. "Yes, my lord. He must have been a shaman. The ochre color is reserved for them."

Aedhir looked at her, his brow arched, but she did not raise her head. "How is it you know so much of the Oirat?"

"My previous master enjoyed to travel, my lord," she said. "As he enjoyed to bring me along in his company."

"Is this place, Nuqut where they mean to bring Rhyden?"

"I heard them say this, yes, my lord," she said.

"That is a long journey," Aedhir remarked, looking out of the window of the coach and speaking more to himself than to her. He pulled his toitin case out of his pocket and slipped one in his mouth. "They would need plenty of horses and supplies for a company of that size, and they would have needed to find a livery here in Capua for them all." He struck flints to light his toitin and drew in a deep breath of smoke.

"Maybe Propraetor Vitus can send his guards out to inquire..."

"Begging my lord's pardon," Tacita said, drawing his gaze. "I do not believe they mean to travel by land back to Ulus. I heard them say they had a boat here at the piers, and that they would leave tonight for the Garyelloch pass to the north."

"They are going by boat?" Aedhir asked.

"Yes, my lord," she said, nodding.

"Well, there might be a turn of good fortune, at least, as I have a boat of mine own," Aedhir muttered, flicking his thumb against the butt of the toitin, knocking the ashes out of the window. "You saw him?" he asked. "You saw Rhyden, my friend with them?"

"Yes, my lord."

"You said they had cut his hair," Aedhir said, his brows lifting, pained. He had jested Rhyden good-naturedly about his long, heavy mane, and Rhyden had explained that he had never cut his hair in all of his thirty-six years, in keeping with ancient Gaeilge practices.

She nodded again. "Yes, my lord."

"Did they ... mark him?" he asked, softly, motioning with his hand toward his left brow and temple. She knew what he meant, and when she nodded again, Aedhir's heart nearly broke.

"Mongol Boldry tattooed him, yes, my lord."

"Mother Above," Aedhir whispered, looking out of the window again, stricken. "Was he hurt? By my breath, if they hurt him, if they beat him even one lash or ... or..."

"He did not appear to be injured, my lord," Tacita said. "I saw no marks, at least upon his face, save the catasta ink. The Oirat had wrapped him in blankets against the cold, and they carried him. He looked unconscious to me, my lord."

"That bastard, Mongo Boldry drugged him," Aedhir said, frowning, his eyes distant upon the passing streets beyond the window.

"They were very gentle with him, my lord," she said, drawing his gaze. "The Oirat, I mean. One of them carried him in his arms, against his chest as you might a sleeping child, and the others drew near ... as though to keep the crowd from knocking against him."

"Of course they were gentle to him ... he is bloody damn valuable property to them!" Aedhir snapped, his voice more sharp than he intended it to be. "They are a wretched race of thieves and marauders! The Good Mother only knows what they have done to him ... what they mean to do! He..." Aedhir's voice cracked, and he felt heat blazing in his face. He fixed his gaze out the window, his toitin forgotten. He felt tears sting his eyes and his frown deepened. "He is my friend," he said softly, breathing in deeply to steady his words. "He saved my life, and if they hurt him ... if those rotted savages as much as touch him, they will answer for it, by my breath. They will answer to me."

Tacita spoke quietly from beside him. "I do not think they mean harm to him, my lord. The Oirat are not a people who practice slavery that I have ever heard tell."

"Then why would they buy him?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

For the first time since the moment of their abrupt introduction, she met his gaze. "I do not know, my lord," she said. "But I remember the way my former master followed by ship to the Chagan Sea."

He blinked at her, silent and surprised.

"It is a long journey," she said. "But as you have a boat, I could lead you there, my lord. You could ask them yourself."

* * * *

Aedhir might have rested his head against the doorframe of the hansom cab and slammed the door repeatedly against his temple for all of the help Quintas Camillus Vitus offered to him.

"My apologies, Captain Fainne," the propraetor said, folding his hands atop his desk. He had been roused from his bed to meet with Aedhir, and wore a hastily knotted cravat drooped over a rumbled shirt with a red justicoat drawn overtop. Aedhir had sent the praetorian guards on duty to fetch him on a matter of "great urgency," but to judge by the expression on Vitus' face as he listened to Aedhir's recounting of the night's events, Rhyden's disappearance did not count as much as "urgency" as it did "insignificance."

"I honestly do not know what you expect me to do about these circumstances," Vitus had told him.

Aedhir had been utterly caught off-guard. "I expect you to help me find Lord Fabhcun, Propraetor Vitus. I expect you to arrest Mongo Boldry on charges of raptio and..."

"Captain Fainne," Vitus said, raising his palm and giving Aedhir pause. "Master Boldry is an exemplary citizen of Capua, and the Torachan empire. He is the realm's largest, most well-respected slave vendors ... and a law abiding taxpayer, may I add. His businesses draw a great deal of profit to both this city, and the imperial treasury in Cneas. I assure you that he would not jeopardize such esteemed status by resorting to the sort of debauched means you have described to acquire new wares for his markets. He has no need."

"I assure you that he did resort to such means," Aedhir said, frowning. "One of my crewmen told me as much himself, and..."

"A crewman you yourself have described as of less than reputable character," Vitus interjected mildly, arching his brow. "You said you have suspected for some time that this man might try to bring harm upon your friend. It sounds to me as though he must have ... not Mongo Boldry."

"This woman saw Lord Fabhcun at one of Boldry's catastas," Aedhir said, pointing to Tacita, who sat beside him quietly in a chair, her eyes and hands upon her lap. "She told me Mongo Boldry's mark was tattooed upon his face, that his hair had been shorn off to disguise his appearance and that..."

"Yes, I know, Captain Fainne. A group of Oirat from the Ulusian Nuqut purchased him," Vitus said. His habit of interrupting was beginning to grate sorely on Aedhir. The propraetor frowned at Tacita. "You will pardon my observation, my lord, but it seems to me a matter most peculiar that out of a catasta packed with hundreds of people, only this woman ... a whore from Euboea ... would have taken notice of an Elf for sale upon the blocks."

"She is not the only one who noticed it," Aedhir said, struggling to maintain some semblance of cordiality in his voice. "She is the only one who would admit it."

"And only after you had purchased her from an abusive new master," Vitus remarked. "Fortuitous circumstances for her, it would seem."

"I believe her," Aedhir said, his hands folding slowly into fists.

"I, however, do not," Vitus replied. "I believe the whore overheard you inquiring after your friend and found an opportunity for herself. I believe this crewman of yours, Nimon Hodder and his fellows brought some harm upon your friend outside of the Pauper's Pyre, and that the lot of them are likely long gone from Capua as we draw breath. I do not believe Mongo Boldry took your friend or sold him to some Oirat, because I believe the Oirat are as likely to venture forth from their meager borders and into the empire proper ... where they are considered enemies of the state for their rebellious efforts ... as I am to sprout a dewblossom shrubbery from my ass, Captain Fainne."

"Lord Fabhcun serves as ambassador for Tiralainn in Cneas," Aedhir said. "I am certain they will feel differently when they are informed of these matters ... as will as my King."

"I assure you, Captain Fainne, that I mean to dispatch immediate word to Cneas on this," Vitus said. "Though I can promise they will concur with my opinion on the matters. That is what they pay me for, my lord."

"And what does Mongo Boldry pay you for, you bloated rot?" Aedhir snapped, leaning forward, any pretense of civility drained in his voice and his countenance. "To turn a blind and oblivious eye whenever he abducts people against their will from your streets and forces them into slavery?"

Vitus looked at him, his mouth turned down slightly. "I will be certain that your King is notified, as well, Captain," he said in a curt, clipped voice.

"Do not worry for that, Propraetor," Aedhir said, standing. "I will have my own word sent to Kierken ... you can count on that."

* * * *

"Pontificating bastard," Aedhir muttered as he marched out of the praetura building. Tacita followed behind him, scurrying to match his broad, brisk stride. "I might have known better. Why else would Mongo Boldry suggest I come to him? His head is crammed so far between Boldry's buttocks, I am amazed he can draw a full breath. Those bloody damn Oirat are likely halfway up the northern coast by now."

He glanced back at Tacita. "What kind of boats would the Oirat use, do you know?"

"I saw the Khahl Ulusians north of them use small sailing vessels for fishing upon Tengriss lake, my lord," she said. "Nothing like the tall ships of the armada, my lord."

"Likely a one-masted longboat with square-rigging," Aedhir said quietly, turning away from her, thinking aloud. "The harbormaster could tell me for certain. They would have had to pay port fares, at least. Hey ... hoah!" He shouted out to a passing hansom, thrusting his hand emphatically in the air to draw the driver's attention. "Come on," he said to Tacita, catching her by the crook of her elbow and leading her toward the carriage.

"I have a longboat waiting for me at the waterfront," he said, as they clambered into the coach. "And a frigate out upon the harbor. We will go to thea'Maorga, collect some supplies, find you some clothes. They already have headway upon us; we will leave tonight. I have some maps that might help us. Are you certain you can help plot the course?"

"I remember the names of villages my master visited along the way, yes, my lord," Tacita replied. "We kept close to the shoreline. I remember the Khar mountains in Lydia."

Aedhir nodded. "Good enough, then," he said, his mouth set in a grim, determined line. *By my breath, it will have to be*, he thought.

Chapter Eleven

AN ABRUPT ENDING TO SHIPBOARD FESTIVITIES

By three o'clock that morning, the celebration aboard thea'Maorga was in full and fervent swing. Fiddles, drums and pipes swelled in cheerful refrain from the main deck, filling the cold night with the warm cacophony of music and bellowed song, and the stomping of dancing feet against the planks resounded like thunder. Portar and ale flowed freely and often from tapped kegs, while the crewmen and women Aedhir had sent from Capuan brothels ducked below into the berth deck in random, rotating shifts, laughing together as they left, emerging once more in short order and beginning anew.

Wen stood near the taffrail of the stern, watching it all, her mouth unfolded in a broad and delighted smile. She had retreated to this point of relative sanctuary nearly an hour earlier, after some of the crew, filled with drunken good intentions, had tried their best to force her into the company of several of the whores in turn.

There would be some circumstances I would be hard pressed to explain, she thought, and she could not help but to laugh. The courtesans and crew had been unoffended by her refusals, but she had shied nonetheless, figuring opportunity least presented was that least encountered.

Even Odhran had lightened in his dour, sullen mood with a pint in his hand and two or three in his gullet. She could see him now, standing along the mended rails of the port side main deck, talking with one of the women.

Odhran was in love with Wen. She knew it, of course; he had admitted it to her once when portar had softened his shy defenses, but she had known it long before then, and yet knew it now. She had known Odhran since childhood. He had been her friend for so long ... her closest, dearest friend ... that she might easily have forgotten he was not a brother to her, and the revelation of his affection had troubled her. She loved Odhran very much, but knew in her heart she could never feel for him the way he hoped that she would, the way he felt for her. It hurt her to realize this, to know that it pained Odhran, but she was helpless to change it ... and terrified of losing him if she tried. She had seen too many lovers' relationships dwindle and die when the bloom of passion waned between them ... including her own mother and father ... and Wen could not take such a chance with Odhran, not when she understood his place in her heart as fully as she did ... and the outcome of any romantic relationship this certainty within her promised. She could not imagine her life without him.

Wen had made conscientious effort to spend time with him that night, knowing it would cheer his surly spirits, but when she had spied the approach of the buxom, pretty lass, she had lingered only long enough to seem courteous, and then withdrew. She had tried many times ... always in vain ... to gently turn Odhran's affections toward other women, and though a seasoned whore was likely not the one to win his heart, at least she had proven to be a pleasant distraction to Odhran. Wen watched him now, talking to the girl, engaging her in a long discussion of the history of prostitution in the civilized Bith.

"It is the world's oldest occupation, you know," he had told the girl, as she had stared up at him, wide-eyed and giddy with portar. When she had shaken her head, unaware of this, he had forged straight ahead, as though offering a lecture to a pupil. "Hoah, yes. For millennia now, some of the most significant and influential governments and cultures have been shaped and formulated around the influences of prostitutes upon the men in leadership positions. Brothel owners in Capua, you know, were once said to hold the very keys to the fledgling empire in their corsets ... why, some have even theorized that the expansion of the Torachan borders was due primarily to the influence of a Lady Livia Drusilla, who was able to convince the ancient emperor, Gnaeus Scipio Magnus that such efforts would serve to greatly improve the variety of her ganeas, and..."

As Wen watched Odhran speak with the woman, gesturing with her hands, she shook her head, drawing her fingertips to her mouth to hide her smile. *Dear Odhran*, she thought, giggling. *Only you would take the company of a perfectly good ... and paid for ... courtesan and use it as the chance to discuss historical occurrences.*

She caught sight of Pryce walking along the spardeck toward her and felt her smile widen. Pryce cradled the same mug of portar he had nursed the night through against the basin of his gloved palm, and he smiled at her, lifting his free hand in a slight wave of greeting.

"He will be leaving us soon," the boatswain, Suli, had told her earlier in the evening, his large face drawn into an expression akin to melancholy. Suli had swallowed enough portar to soften his gruff demeanor and wax wistfully as he had watched Pryce dancing with some of the women and crew upon the main deck.

"Leaving?" Wen had asked. She had begun to realize a sort of dynamic aboard the ship that night, as everyone relaxed from the stresses of responsibilities and duties. While she had spent much of the day below, keeping Pryce company, many of the crew had stopped to pay brief visits with the lieutenant, including Suli. Most had stayed only a few moments, offering Pryce affable hair-tousling or good-natured

ribbing, and Wen had come to understand why. Many aboard the *Maorga* ... including most of the warrant officers, like Suli ... had sailed with her father for many long years. They had all known Pryce since he had been a boy, and Wen was touched and moved to realize that Pryce had become in many ways, a sort of surrogate son to all of them.

"Hoah, sure," Suli had said, slurping on his portar. He had nodded his chin toward Pryce. "You think he is going to spend the rest of his days aboard this raft with the likes of us, laddie? Another year, maybe two, and Kierken will appoint him captain of his own ship." He had smiled, proudly and somewhat sorrowfully. "He will leave us then, rot his little hide, but it is the best for him. He is a good lad, that one, and a fine officer. And here, I remember when he was just hock-high to a pony, and frightened by the rigging heights. I used to bear him on my back aloft, his little arms about my neck, clamped so tightly I could scarcely breathe. For some reason, he figured it was safe that way and I would not let us fall." He had glanced at Wen and winked. "Or that I was so damn broad, I would cushion him from harm if we did."

"What are you doing here all by yourself?" Pryce asked her as he approached.

She laughed. "I am trying to keep clear of all of the madness."

Pryce laughed with her. "That sounds like a good plan to me," he said. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," she said. She watched him turn around and hop onto the taffrail, sitting comfortably on the balustrade as if heedless of the steep plummet into the water beyond its narrow edge. She tried to imagine this young man, at such seeming ease in so precarious a pose, frightened of the rigging heights as a boy, clinging to Suli's neck in a stranglehold and could not.

"Odhran has found himself a friend," Pryce remarked, the corner of his mouth hooking wryly as he took a sip from his portar and nodded toward the starboard main.

Wen laughed again. "He is discussing the growth of prostitution in the civilized Bith with her," she said, and Pryce glanced at her, his brow raised, making her laugh again. "He was enrolled in the historian laureate program at the university. This is his idea of being charming and flirtatious."

"Has anyone explained to him that she is as sure a lay as he is likely to ever find?" Pryce asked. "No flirtation required. You do not even need to speak coherently, and she would be agreeable?"

Wen laughed. "I do not think so."

"He was discussing the development of black powder with me the other morning, while we took target practice with the an'dagas," Pryce said. "I have read about it, books and such, but he knew far more about it than I did. He was in the laureate program? I did not know that." He looked toward Odhran, his brow still raised. "Why would he give that up for the Navy?"

Wen shrugged, her smile faltering, her gaze dropping into her own mug of ale. "I ... I convinced him a life of adventure on the sea was far more enlightening than any old musty tome or moldering history volume."

Pryce smiled, kicking his feet slightly, knocking his heels against the balusters. "How about you, Wen?" he asked, and he poked Wen lightly in the hip with the toe of his shoe. She looked at him and he winked. "I have not seen you retire below with one of our fair ladies yet tonight. I have been keeping an eye on you. Do not tell me you are shy."

He nudged Wen with his toe again, and she laughed. "I am not shy," she said. "And you are a fine one to talk, Pryce. You have not gone below, either ... and plenty more ladies have tried to persuade you than me, I must say."

He shrugged in concession, smiling as he leaned forward, tapping his mug against hers. "Fair enough," he said. "I am glad to see I am not the only one who prefers the company of a woman with whom I am stupid enough to fancy myself in love."

"You are in love, Pryce?" Wen asked. She felt a momentary ... and, she told herself fiercely, inexplicable ... disappointment by this revelation.

He glanced at her as he took another swallow of portar. "Not anymore," he replied. "I came right 'round to my senses on that one, fortunately ... or rather, they were brought 'round to me through no particular effort on my part. Either way, purpose served."

Wen rested her elbows on the railing by his hip. "Who was she?"

Pryce shrugged again. "Just a girl."

"Was she pretty?" Wen asked, and Pryce laughed.

"Yes," he said. "She was beautiful, as a matter of fact. The most beautiful girl I have ever seen." He looked down at the deck, kicking his feet again absently. "Her name is Mena Syddall. She lives in Belgaeran. I met her at a party at the royal palace when I was twenty, while we were laid up in Tiralainn. Aedhir had an invitation and brought me along. He knows the King from the First War, you know. Aedhir is not much into parties or aristocratic social pomp like that, but he thought I might enjoy it. I met her there, and we exchanged letters for a year or so past that. I saw her on those occasions when I was in Tiralainn for awhile. She..." He shrugged his shoulders. "She was someone to miss ... to look forward to, I suppose."

Wen knew Mena Syddall. Mena's mother, Lady Liadan Syddall was friends with Wen's mother, Iona, and Wen had been forced to endure Mena's insufferable, catty company since childhood. Mena was indeed beautiful; for years, Aelwen had been envious of her pale, creamy complexion, her golden tumble of glossy curls, her blue eyes. With her own Median heritage apparent in her dusky skin tone and dark hair ... so distinctive and different from most of the other noble daughters in Belgaeran ... it had taken Wen a long time to discover within herself a comfort level and confidence in her own appearance. She had only come to this point as a teen, when she realized her resemblance to her father ... whom she believed to be dead ... was something that deeply and inherently pleased her.

Mena was beautiful, but she had always been very aware of this, and had never been above using it to her advantage. She had been betrothed to a Lord Powell Buncombe since she was quite young, but had not married him until she was twenty. In the meantime, Mena had been found to bat her eyelashes, thrust forth her bosom, feign vapors and murmur in trilling, sweet little voices to get men to do anything she wanted of them. She was fond to brag among her noble friends of numerous lovers, and all of the tokens of affection they would bestow upon her. She could seem very sweet and sincere to them each in turn, and Wen had long felt sorry for these hapless lads who would fall for her wiles.

"What?" Pryce asked, noticing her peculiar expression.

Wen tried not to look at him. She and Mena were the same age; a year younger than Pryce. If Pryce had met Mena when he was twenty, that would have made Mena still a year in full away from her

wedding to Lord Buncombe. She remembered now, nineteen-year-old Mena offering idle gossip at a summer tea party Iona had forced Wen to attend at the Syddalls' home. They had been gathered together, a large gaggle of noble daughters, all primed and powdered, sitting around in their enormous, ballooning hoop skirts, contouches and crinolines, flapping silk fans against the oppressive heat and chatting together in quiet voices about topics their mothers surely would have throttled them over had they heard.

"Wen?" Pryce said, smiling gently at her as he moved his hand in front of her face, attracting her gaze. She blinked at him and he laughed. "What is it?"

"It is nothing," she said. "I know Mena Syddall, that is all. A ... a sometime acquaintance. Her mother and mine ... they are friends."

Mena had told the girls that summer afternoon about a lover she had taken for herself. She had described him as a lieutenant in the Crown Navy, a young man she exchanged letters with, whose physical company she seldom enjoyed because he was often out to sea for several months at a time, but when she did, his prowess and passion had more than made amends for his absences. Mena and the others had giggled together as she described in lusty and heated detail her overnight trysts with the young naval officer at inns, when she would lie and tell her mother she was with friends. Wen had tried to smile politely during the tales, though she had found such topics of discourse rather pathetic.

"He told me that he loves me in his last letter ... can you fathom of it?" Mena had whispered, and all of her friends had cooed together, tittering. "In two weeks, I shall walk down the aisle at Ardeaglais'Coroin cathedral to be wed, and this silly little lamb fancies himself in love! Truly, why must men confuse their loins with their hearts? As though I would ever find more room for him than in my bed! He is a lovely distraction, I tell you, and a splendid lover besides, but not even of noble birth. His salary is pittance, his name as worthless as a stone. What would he expect of me?"

"You know Mena?" Pryce asked, and he looked at Wen, his face filled with a sudden, reluctant hope. "Did she ever speak of me?"

Pryce would likely be humiliated to realize that moments he considered tender and private with Mena had been broadcast as fodder among the gossip circles of Belgaeran aristocratic society, and Wen did not have to force gentle sympathy into her smile or her voice as she lied to him. "Not that I can recall."

Pryce nodded, looking momentarily forlorn. He averted his eyes to his portar. "Hoah, I ... I suppose she would not have."

"She is married," Wen said quietly. "Three years now."

He nodded again. "Yes, I know," he said. "I arrived in Belgaeran on the day of the wedding." He glanced at Wen and smiled wryly. "There was fortunate circumstance, eh? I made it to the cathedral just in time to hear her vows."

Wen blinked at him, startled anew. She, too, had attended Mena's wedding; she had, in fact, been forced by Iona to serve as one of Mena's attendants in the ceremony.

Pryce laughed without much humor. "You should have seen the look on her face, Wen, when I approached her and her new husband after the service to offer my congratulations. He had no idea who I was, of course, and he seemed a most gracious fellow. But you should have seen Mena ... pale as linen, nearly whooping for breath. I thought she would collapse onto the floor. I suppose that is Captain

Fainne's bad influence on me ... something bold he might have tried in my place." He shook his head and laughed.

He took a sip of portar. "I did get to see his daughter there, as well," he remarked, and Wen froze, her eyes flying wide. "Captain Fainne's, I mean ... from a distance, at least, I saw her. He has a daughter, did you know? He has not seen her in seventeen years. She was in the wedding party. I thought of speaking with her, but I did not." He smiled again. "I am somewhat glad I did not now."

"Why?" Wen asked softly, forcing her voice from her throat.

"I was angry with her at the time," Pryce said. "Aedhir wrote to her always, years and years of letters, and she never answered him, not once. It hurt him. He would never say as much, but I knew it. I could not understand it. No matter how she felt about him, surely, I thought by his letters, she could see that he loved her. He has always been such a good father to me, and I could not understand why she did not love him like I did."

"Maybe she did love him," Wen said. "Maybe she had good reason not to write."

Pryce nodded, raising his brows. "She did, though I did not know it at the time ... that is why I am glad I did not speak to her at the wedding. I was angry enough that day; the Good Mother only knows what might have come out of my mouth." He glanced at Wen. "Her mother told her that Aedhir was dead. He only just learned of it this last time in Belgaeran. Aelwen ... that is his daughter ... she wrote to him and told him of it. All of these years, Aelwen thought he was dead."

She listened to the sound of her name roll from his lips. He said it softly, the timbre in his voice dropping slightly with each mention. It was a sound she thought she could grow accustomed to. "What did she look like?" she asked.

"I could not really say," he said. "I only saw her from a distance. She had cosmetics on her face, her hair all upswept ... and I have to admit, by this point, I had swallowed quite a bit of brimague to muster enough mettle to step foot in the cathedral." He lifted his brow thoughtfully. "She seemed beautiful to me. Tall and slender, dark-skinned, like her father. She was one of Mena's attendants, and they wore these awful, bloated yellow gowns with crinolines, underpinnings, panniers, and..." He motioned with his hand toward his hips, suggesting a swollen mess of undergarments and slips.

Wen had never liked the cumbersome, clumsy apparel of suitable noblewomen; she had long thought Mena had picked the most forsaken and dreadfully enormous lateral panniers and skirts she could find just to spite Wen. "Hoah, tell me of it," she muttered, speaking aloud without meaning to. Pryce blinked at her, puzzled by the comment and she felt abashed heat stoke in her cheeks. "I ... I mean, they are hard to get off," she said. "You find yourself in a moment of passion, and then an hour later, you are still wading through thirty-seven layers of a woman's crinolines, wrestling to unhook the damn pannier or unfetter the rotted corset, not to mention unknitting the stomacher lacings and garter ties."

Pryce laughed.

"It is amazing any of us wait around long enough to ever get laid," Wen added, making Pryce laugh all the harder.

"The others looked silly," he said when his laughter had faded into chuckles. "But Aelwen ... she managed to look somehow elegant in it nonetheless. How, I cannot fathom, but I remember that struck me about her. I never told Aedhir about that ... about seeing her there." He glanced at Wen. "So you do

not, either, Wen. That is between us."

"I would not tell, Pryce," she said, looking at him. *She seemed beautiful to me*, Pryce had said and she smiled somewhat, thinking again of the sound of her name as he had spoken it.

"I am glad you are with the crew, Wen," Pryce said. "I have not known many friends my own age that I could talk to about things before."

"I am glad to listen and that you would call me your friend, Pryce," she said, and when his smile widened for her, she thought to herself, *Mena Syddall is a bloody damn fool*.

"I would and I do, Wen," Pryce told her, and he grinned. "And by that friendship, I think it is my duty to find us each a woman." He slid his hips down from the balustrade and hopped nimbly to his feet.

"Hoah, no," Wen said, shaking her head.

"Hoah, yes," Pryce said, stilling grinning, nodding at her. "One for you, and one for me. Love be damned ... at least for the night."

"Really, Pryce, no," Wen said, backpedaling.

"Really, Wen, yes." He hooked his arm around her shoulders and drew her against him, canting his wrist so that his hand rested against her head. Wen's cheek pressed against the lapel of his coat and she felt him prop his chin against the crown of her head. It was a friendly embrace, and she did not mind it at all.

"You need a lover, Wen," he said. "We both do, I say. A firm pair of breasts, lean thighs and agile hips will do us each a fathom of good. And you know what they say." He dropped her a wink. "What happens in Capua remains in Capua. The same is surely true for its harbor. Besides, you cannot spend the entire night hiding back here in the shadows, listening to my ramblings. People will think you fancy me or something."

Wen smiled as he tousled her hair fondly, turning her loose. *They would be right*, she thought.

* * * *

Pryce was not kidding about finding courtesans for them, and as Wen walked alongside of him, following the starboard railing toward the main deck, she struggled to think of a graceful way to get out of the situation. She did not know what alarmed her more ... that Pryce was so determined to see Wenham Poel laid, or that he was willing to entertain one of the prostitutes himself. The idea of Pryce taking a woman to his bed ... and likely within Wen's earshot through the thin walls of her stateroom ... left her feeling dismayed.

She need not have worried too much over it; all at once, Pryce paused, resting his hands against the balustrade and leaning out over the side of the ship, his eyes turned toward the city of Capua.

"What is it?" Wen asked, leaning over beside him. She caught a faint glimpse of yellow lantern light, a solitary spot reflected in shimmering fragments upon the water and realized a boat was approaching the frigate.

"Captain Fainne, I think," Pryce said, sounding somewhat relieved. Aedhir and Rhyden had been ashore for a long time. Pryce had offered reassurances to Wen, saying Aedhir had probably taken Rhyden out to some of the taverns he was familiar with in Capua rather than risk any sort of troublesome

confrontations with drunken crewmen aboard the *Maorga*, but Wen had been able to see in his eyes, the troubled set of his mouth that he had been concerned about the Captain, as well. Nimon Hodder and his ashore crew had not returned, either, and Wen had still harbored worries in the back of her mind that something bad might come of it. She hoped that the longboat was indeed her father's, and not Hodder returning from the city.

* * * *

"Hoah, there!" Pryce called out to the boat.

"Hoah, aboard!" Aedhir called back. A silhouetted figure stood in the longboat and as it drew alongside the *Maorga*, they could see the Captain now in the glow of the boat's lamp, looking up at them, his face shrouded in heavy shadows. Rhyden Fabhcun sat on one of the benches, his coat drawn about him, his blond hair fluttering in the breeze.

Pryce grinned broadly, raising his hand to Aedhir. "Captain Fainne!" He turned over his shoulder. "Suli!" he shouted out over the fiddle music. "Suli, call hands to the davits and prepare to hoist! The Captain has returned!"

The crew, filled with portar-induced merriment, cheered at this as though greeting a returning hero. Hands aboard the longboat secured the davit lines in place, and then crewmen on the main deck began to hoist the boat up. Pryce's bright expression faltered as the longboat raised, and light from the ship found its way to Aedhir. Aedhir's brows were drawn and furrowed, his mouth set in a stern, angry line, his eyes blazing as he scowled.

Suli and the others noticed as well, and they drew back uncertainly from the longboat as Aedhir dropped down in a broad stride onto the main deck. He turned around and held out his hands to help Rhyden down.

"Captain Fainne, sir...?" Pryce asked hesitantly.

Aedhir glanced at Pryce over his shoulder as he took Rhyden's hands in his own. "Lieutenant Finamur, call all officers to my quarters in ten minutes," he said, his expression not softening from its furious set in the least. He stepped back as Rhyden hopped down to the deck, and Pryce blinked in bewilderment, realizing the Elf's shoes were gone; he wore only a pair of wool socks on his feet. A closer look only confused Pryce all the more. It was not Rhyden Fabhcun at all in Aedhir's company, but a young woman with long blond hair and blue eyes, a woman wrapped in Rhyden's coat with a dark tattoo marking her face, an unfamiliar pattern drawn about her left eye and cheek.

"The rest of you, gather your things," Aedhir said to the hands in the long boat. "Pack lightly, only one bag apiece ... plenty of clothes for cold weather. Bring them back here and wait for me. No portars, no gossip and no dawdling."

"Aye, Captain," the men said, their voices overlapping.

"Mister Cobbold, I will need food stuffs and water brought topside, enough for sixteen men to last a month at least ... see it done," Aedhir called out to the ship's cook. "Yeoman Pether, see Mister Cobbold ashore at dawn to see what we take with us replaced in full."

"Aye, Captain," said Aedhir's yeoman.

"Yes, sir, straight away, sir," the cook said, already heading for the nearest companionway.

"Captain Fainne, sir, I..." Pryce began again, and Aedhir narrowed his brows.

"I gave you an order, Lieutenant," he said. "Tend to it."

"Aye, Captain," Pryce said, abashed and puzzled.

The music and laughter had faded into silence, and Aedhir snatched the blond woman by the hand, marching her across the deck. "Mister Suli, kindly dispatch every woman on this ship save this one in my company back ashore post-haste," he called out, without looking at the boatswain. "Check the berth decks. I want no one aboard this ship who is not a member of the crew."

"Aye, Captain," Suli said.

"Mister Feldwick, if Nimon Hodder or any among his party approach from ashore, I want them shackled at gunpoint and locked in the hold. Do you understand me?"

"Aye, Captain," Thierley Feldwick called back.

"If they offer you resistance, shoot their bloody asses," Aedhir said, pausing to glance over his shoulder at his master-at-arms.

Feldwick looked startled at this. "Uh ... aye, sir," he replied.

Pryce and Wen exchanged confounded, wary glances. "Tell Haely to call the officers for me, Wen," he said, breaking into a wide stride and following Aedhir. "Ten minutes in the Captain's quarters."

"Alright," she said, nodding as he left her.

Pryce trailed Aedhir and the mysterious woman down the companionway ladder, and along the narrow corridor toward the Captain's chamber. "Captain," he said, hastening his pace to keep up with them. "Captain Fainne, where is Lord Fabhcun?"

Aedhir unlocked his door and threw it wide. He let the woman enter before him, pausing to meet Pryce's gaze. "I told you to call the officers, Pryce."

"It is tended to, sir," Pryce said. "There is not an officer standing on deck who did not here you issue the summons yourself, sir." He blinked at Aedhir, confused and alarmed. "Aedhir, what has happened? Who is that woman? Where is Lord Fabhcun?"

Aedhir's face softened at last and he reached out, brushing his gloved fingertips against Pryce's cheek. He looked exhausted and stricken, and Pryce's concern only mounted as Aedhir hooked his hand against the back of his neck and drew him against him, hugging him fiercely. "Hoah, Pryce," Aedhir whispered. "I love you, lad, do you know that?"

That a father-son relationship existed between them was fairly common knowledge among the crew, but even so, Pryce was well at an age and rank aboard the ship that he and Aedhir had long-abandoned most fond affectations or demonstrations toward each other. Thus the embrace, and particularly the fervency of it, left Pryce all the more disconcerted. "Aedhir, please," he said, his voice muffled against Aedhir's shoulder. "You are frightening me. What has happened?"

Aedhir stepped back from him. "Come on," he said quietly, nodding toward his quarters. "Let me ... hoah, let me collect my thoughts for a moment, and I will explain it to you. I promise."

* * * *

The commissioned and warrant officers of the *Maorga* gathered as ordered in the Captain's quarters. They listened as Aedhir recounted the night's grim events ashore to them, and they watched him pace before the stern windows, his hands clasped against the small of his back, his brows furrowed.

"I spoke with the harbormaster, and he recalls this group of Oirat," Aedhir said. "A twenty-mark spurred his memory a bit further, and he told me they arrived to port two days ago by ship ... a one-masted, square-rigger, just as I thought. They had not told him of their intentions to leave, but he led me to their dock, and they were gone. They likely have a two-and-a-half, maybe three hour lead upon us, and I do not mean to see them have any more than this."

He paused in his pacing, turning his head to meet the gaze of each of his officers in turn. "I do not know what each of you might think of Rhyden Fabhcun, and at this moment, I am not inclined to care. He has brought no harm upon this ship, and no misfortune to the crew. Rhyden is my friend. He saved my life, and I am going to find him, wherever these Oirat savages have brought him, and I am going to see him safe."

Aedhir nodded to indicate the blond woman. "This is Tacita Metella," he said. "She saw Rhyden and the Oirat who have taken him at the catasta. She told me she heard them mention that they mean to return to the Nuqut of Ulu. She said she knows how to get there and I believe her. I do not care what each of you might think of that, either. Yes, she bears the mark of a slave on her face, but while she is in my company, she is as a citizen of Tiralainn ... and she is a free woman."

He turned to Wen. "Mister Poel, you are slight enough of form. Kindly escort my lady Metella to your quarters and offer her some vestments she might wear."

"Aye, Captain Fainne," Wen said. The woman, Tacita Metella stood, still wrapped in Rhyden's overcoat and Aedhir's stockings, and the two blinked at one another uncertainly. Wen walked toward the doorway, and Tacita fell in step, her long fingers clutching anxiously at the lapels of her coat as she fixed her eyes on the floor.

"I am leaving within the hour," Aedhir announced. "I will need two of you to accompany me ... trustworthy men, who can handle a firearm and a sword. At dawn, as I ordered, Misters Pether and Cobbold will row ashore and replenish our supplies. Lieutenant Finamur, you will see this ship to open seas before noon, heading southward for Cneas. I do not care how you do it, Suli ... plant a bloody damn tree on the main deck if you must ... but you rig me something that can draw me enough sail."

"Aye, Captain," Suli said.

"Captain Fainne, sir, I..." Pryce began.

"Take her south to Cneas, and send immediate word to Kierken," Aedhir said to him, interrupting. "I do not trust the bloody bastards here to see it done. Their pockets are all padded too well from that venalicium, Mongo Boldry's purse. Tell Kierken what has happened and where I have gone."

"I would go with you, sir," Pryce said.

"Absolutely not," Aedhir said. He was not about to introduce the young lieutenant to that sort of risk.

Earlier, at the threshold of his chamber, when he had clutched Pryce against him, all that had kept racing through his anguished mind had been, *It could have been you, Pryce. Mother Above, just as easily, I could have failed you, too.* "Mister Feldwick, Lieutenant Haely," he said. "You will both be with me."

"Aye, Captain," said Feldwick.

"Yes, sir, Captain Fainne," said Haely.

Pryce blinked at Aedhir, visibly angry and insulted, and then looked down at his shoes, his brows drawn and furrowed.

"The rest of you do what needs be to get this ship to Cneas," Aedhir said. "You will answer to Lieutenant Finamur as you would to me. Suli, any problems, and you lock men in the hold."

"Aye, sir," Suli said.

"You will wait for me in Cneas," Aedhir said. "I do not know how long I will be, but if it is more than six weeks, I will send word to you at Samos Bay. I do not know what will come of this, but if the empire is not cooperative, it is likely Kierken will call all of his fleet back to Tiralainn. If the King orders you, Lieutenant Finamur, do not wait for me ... heed his command."

Aedhir nodded at his men. "That is all. You are dismissed. Lieutenant Haely, a moment, if you please. We will need to plot a course north for the Chagan Sea."

"Yes, sir," Haely said, as the rest of the officers began to file from the room. Pryce remained where he stood, unmoving, and Odhran lingered near the doorway, his expression troubled and uncertain.

Aedhir glanced at them. "I said you are dismissed, gentlemen."

"Captain Fainne, if I may, sir...?" Pryce began.

"You may not, Lieutenant," Aedhir said, frowning. "The topic is not open for discussion."

Pryce did not move. "You said you needed trustworthy men who could handle weapons, sir," he said. "As your First Officer, sir, I would hope you had some trust in me. I am familiar with swordplay ... as you taught me yourself, sir, and I am a good shot with both an'daga and isneach."

Aedhir locked his gaze with Pryce's. "I said no, Lieutenant," he said. "As my First Officer, I need you to see to the ship."

Pryce did not avert his eyes. "If I may, sir, Lieutenant Haely is far more qualified than I to see the ship to Cneas, in such condition as she is," he said. "He has ten more years of Naval experience, sir."

Aedhir glared at Pryce. Haely did have more practice cunning the helm than Pryce, and even if they kept the ship pointing along shore south to Cneas, with only a fished-together main mast and sails rigged to her, the voyage would be tricky at best ... and treacherous at worst, especially if they encountered another storm rushing from the southwest again.

"If I may speak freely, sir, given the circumstances, the ship would be best served with Lieutenant Haely at the quarterdeck," Pryce said.

Aedhir glanced at Haely. Cluer raised his brow and offered a small shrug; apparently, Pryce's line of thinking had occurred to him, as well. He was just too polite to mention it aloud.

Aedhir stepped very near to Pryce and leaned forward, speaking softly, directly against his ear. "Stop arguing with me, Pryce. It is too dangerous, and you are not coming."

Pryce canted his face, replying in Aedhir's ear. "I am not arguing. You are speaking as my father and not my Captain, out of what you think are my best interests, and not the crew's. I am merely pointing that out to you."

"Damn it, Pryce..." Aedhir whispered, closing his eyes.

"Please, Aedhir," Pryce said. "You know I am right."

Aedhir heaved a sigh and stepped away from Pryce, frowning at him. "Lieutenant Haely, can you bring the ship to Cneas?" he asked, not averting his eyes from Pryce's.

"I can, yes, sir," Haely replied.

The corner of Pryce's mouth flickered upward, and Aedhir's frowned deepened. "Stop smiling at me, damn it," he whispered.

"Yes, sir," Pryce said, drawing his mouth into line.

"You are impertinent, Lieutenant, and willful, besides," Aedhir said.

"Yes, sir," Pryce agreed, nodding politely.

"Lieutenant Haely, I am appointing you First Officer," Aedhir said. "You will have the ship in my stead, and your subordinate, Lieutenant Pryce will be with me."

"Yes, sir," Haely said.

"Thank you, sir," Pryce said.

"I just demoted you, boy ... do not thank me," Aedhir said, scowling. "It was reprimand, not a reward. You keep that mouth of yours flapping, and you may find yourself docked back to midshipman before dawn."

"Yes, sir," Pryce said.

At the mention of *midshipman*, Aedhir remembered that Odhran remained by the door, and he turned. "Mister Frankley, was there something you needed?"

* * * *

Odhran blinked at the Captain. He had watched the murmured exchange between Pryce and Aedhir without understanding a word the two said to one another, though he knew Pryce was trying to argue his way into accompanying Aedhir to rescue Rhyden. Odhran wanted to go, too, but he did not know how to ask. When he had heard Aedhir relent, letting Pryce take Lieutenant Haely's place on the longboat, Odhran had felt some hope that maybe he, too, would be allowed to go, but when the moment was upon him to ask, he found he could not seem to find the words.

As he had listened to Aedhir speak, as Aedhir had told them what had happened in Capua ... and how Nimon Hodder had fairly well bartered Rhyden Fabhcun into slavery ... his heart and breath had seized with dismay.

No, oh, no, he had thought, horrified. Please, no.

Never in his life would Odhran have imagined Nimon might see that kind of harm to the Elf. He had been worried that Nimon might pick a tussle with Rhyden, that he and his friends might try to rough him up some were they to find him in the city, but this was something far worse, and far more insidious.

How could Nimon have done this? He said he would keep Rhyden from sailing with us again, but I never thought ... never...

Odhran had stared at the woman, Tacita Metella, at the disfiguring tattoo on her otherwise flawless face, as Aedhir had told them how Rhyden had been tattooed with a similar mark. Nimon Hodder had drugged him, Aedhir said, and then he had been smuggled into subterranean catacombs beneath the city, his face marked, his clothes stripped, his long hair shorn off. Rhyden had been forced onto the catasta auction blocks and sold, as though no better than livestock, bartered for and purchased by a group of crude, nomadic people who would more likely than not see all sorts of harm come to him.

That is not what I thought would happen, Odhran had thought, distraught. Please, that is not what I thought would happen. I thought they might hurt him a bit, beat him up some at the worst, but not this. He did not deserve this.

The worst realization of all for Odhran was that although he had been aboard the ship when Rhyden was abducted, he very well might have been the catalyst to see the act through to fruition. *I told Nimon all of those things ... about the storms in Belgaeran, about Rhyden saying he used draiocht to wake Pryce up. Why did I tell him those things? Maybe it made Nimon angry enough ... convinced him enough that he would do this to Rhyden ... and to Captain Fainne.*

He had glanced at Wen, watching her face, her large, dark eyes respond to his father's visible and apparent pain. Aedhir was devastated by what had happened, wracked with guilt, and Odhran wanted to cry out to him. *It is not your fault! It is mine! You could not have known, but I could have. I should have! This is all my fault.*

Wen's eyes had glistened with tears as she watched Aedhir's expression shift continuously between rage and anguish. *She would never forgive me if she knew, he thought. Nimon might have as easily sold her father into slavery as Rhyden Fabhcun. Wen would never forgive me if she thought I had anything to do with this.*

What have I done? Odhran thought. Mother Above, what have I done?

"Mister Frankley, was there something you needed?"

Aedhir's words, the mention of his name jerked Odhran from his despairing thoughts. "It is not your fault, Captain Fainne," he said. It was all he could muster of what he wanted to say, what he desperately wanted to admit.

Aedhir smiled at him gently, somewhat surprised by the comment. "Thank you for that, lad."

"I would like to go with you, sir," Odhran said, and Aedhir raised his brows, surprised anew. "Please, Captain Fainne, I know how to fire an an'daga and an isneach. I am strong, sir, a good oarsman if needs be, and there is little need for me here on the frigate. I would serve you much better, sir, on the longboat."

Aedhir walked toward him. "That is very brave of you, Odhran."

"Only officers know how to use the firearms, sir," Odhran said. "If you bring me along, that would make four of us, sir ... you, Mister Feldwick, Lieutenant Finamur and me. I would not fail you, Captain Fainne. I would not complain. I would do my share, sir, gladly, willingly."

"I appreciate that you would offer, Odhran," Aedhir said. "But I do not know what we are getting ourselves into on this one, lad. It will likely be dangerous. I would have you stay here, aboard the frigate."

"He is strong, Captain, if I may," Pryce said, drawing Aedhir's gaze and startling the breath from Odhran. "If the wind is not in our favor, we would have need of a good set of shoulders ... a pair of arms like his at the oars. And if I may further, sir...?"

"When have you not?" Aedhir muttered under his breath, his expression more amused than aggravated.

"Mister Frankley is a good shot with a firearm, Captain," Pryce said. "Haely and I have watched him dispatch a clay pigeon from one hundred and fifty paces at least, have we not, Haely?"

"He can shoot better than me, that is for certain," Haely remarked.

Aedhir looked at Pryce. "So you think I should let him go?"

"I think Mister Frankley made an astute observation in that he would better serve on the longboat than aboard the frigate in such circumstances, yes, sir," Pryce replied.

Odhran stared at Pryce, utterly flabbergasted. Had he lived to be three thousand years old, he never would have expected Pryce Finamur to agree with him ... much less stand up to Captain Fainne in his defense.

Aedhir hooked his brow at the lieutenant. "Anyone else you think we should include?" he asked. "Anyone I have forgotten?"

"I think Mister Poel would prove of greater benefit to our company, sir, than aboard the *Maorga*, as well," Pryce said. "He, too, is trained with firearms. That would make five of us, sir, all experienced shots."

Aedhir shook his head, running his fingers through his hair. He turned to Odhran. "Well, there you go, lad," he said. "My voice of reason has uttered. You should pack your things and bid the same of Wen ... one pack apiece, and no more. Warm clothes."

Odhran thought Aedhir was joking. "Truly, sir?" he asked.

"Yes, truly, go," Aedhir said, frowning, flapping his hand.

"Thank you, sir," Odhran said, and he looked beyond Aedhir's shoulder at Pryce. Odhran had come to realize in the last hour that there were a great many things of late that he was wrong about. He had been wrong in his misgivings and prejudices against Rhyden Fabhcun, and wrong to trust Nimon Hodder

enough to share those thoughts and opinions with him. He had been wrong about Nimon's intentions, his potential threat against Rhyden, and now, as he looked at Pryce, he realized.

Maybe I have been wrong about you, too, Odhran thought as Pryce offered him a quick, fleeting smile.

Chapter Twelve

THE KHAHL

It is for the good of the kingdom, Yisun Goyaljin, the Qatun'Eke or Queen Mother of Ulus thought to herself as she watched her eunuch guard, Megetu, crush the young Oirat girl's throat between his hands.

And the Khahl.

Yisun's name, *goyaljin* ... meaning *of beauty* ... had been given to her at birth as though a divine promise by the Tengri themselves, and like all beautiful things within the Taiga region of Ulus, as a child, Yisun had been brought to live within the palace at the royal city of Kharhorin. Here, beautiful noble daughters became noble wives; beautiful commoners became concubines, soldiers and slaves. The palace of Kharhorin was always filled with exquisite beauty; its granite walls and towering archways collected and coveted it, reserving its splendor and glory for only a chosen, privileged few to behold.

Yisun had been brought here at the tender age of ten, betrothed from birth as a bride-to-be to her cousin, the Kagan Bujiragh. As the first-born daughter of the Manchu tribe noyan, or leader, Yisun had been chosen as one of the Kagan's royal harem of wives, historically representing of the twenty principle tribes of the Khahl Ulusians. Yisun had been brought to the palace, but she had not married Bujiragh or made a conjugal bed with him until she was twelve. In the two years between, she had served under Bujiragh's mother, Hulagu, the former Qatun'Eke.

Hulagu had found a special fondness, as she was Yisun's aunt, and herself, once a first-born daughter to the Manchu noyan, Yisun's grandfather. The Manchu were the descendants of the ancient dragonriders; once only their clans had been allowed to saddle and soar with the great beasts of legends. Hulagu believed ... as did Yisun ... that it was important to keep the Manchu bloodline infused with that of the Kagan, the descendent of the great Duua. The closer the links between the royal house and the dragons, the only better served could destiny be.

Yisun had learned a great deal from Hulagu, and sometimes, she missed her still. Hulagu had made certain none but the heir of a Manchu would claim her son's throne. She had surreptitiously poisoned and drugged the other harem wives, leaving them dead, barren or unable to bring an infant fully to term in order to ensure Yisun would be the first among them to bear Bujiragh a child.

"It is for the good of the kingdom ... and the Khahl," Hulagu had told Yisun, her words becoming a mantra of sorts for the impressionable young woman.

Hulagu had died shortly after the birth of Targutai, Yisun's son and Bujiragh's heir. When Bujiragh had followed his mother to the great spirit tree shortly thereafter, Yisun had known exactly what to do, because she had learned from Hulagu. She had expelled the other women in Bujiragh's harem, returning them all to their tribes and families. She would have preferred to kill them; none of them had ever liked her, as she had been Hulagu's favorite ... and therefore, Bujiragh's as well ... but Yisun had been wise enough not to stir ill will among the Khahl tribes against her. Targutai was just an infant when he was named Kagan of Ulus, and until he grew into his position, until he was able to command the throne, Yisun

held it in his stead, and she had found need in the meanwhile for allies.

Now, at twenty-eight years old, Yisun continued to hold the reins of the Ulus state. Targutai was nine; two years ago, in an elaborate ceremony, he had assumed his father's throne and title, but he was yet a boy, more concerned with childish interests than affairs of state.

As is apparent this morning, Yisun thought, her gaze unflinching, her lovely face stoic and impassive as she watched the Oirat girl slap her palms feebly against Megetu's hands. The eunuch had hoisted her from the floor, and her feet drummed in the empty air, her helpless motions waning as her face grew nearly purple in hue, her breath struggling for escape, wheezing in her throat. *Childish interests, and impetuous endeavors.*

Ten years earlier, Yisun had wisely bartered an allegiance with Torach, becoming part of their empire, a united Morthir. Though from the Torachan perspective, such a move seemed defeated concession, in Yisun's point of view it was advantageous and wise. The Torachan were eager to continue expanding their empire; Ulus was poised as the border between the empire and the free territories of Engjold to the north. The Torachans sent a great number of soldiers and troops into Ulus in efforts to stake claims in Engjold, which meant the empire also funneled great quantities of money into Ulus as well. The Khahl benefited from this position, as did Yisun's son, Targutai, because in the eyes of his people, such good fortunes came from his hands and decrees, not hers.

Targutai was the direct, blood descendent of Duua. On the day he was born, deep within the southern Nuqut region of Ulus, a son had been born to the Oirat as well ... Dobun's heir, a boy named Temuchin Arightei. The two infants had breached the boundaries between womb and world at precisely the same moment; they had each drawn in their first startled gasps of air in unison, and they had each uttered their first, tremulous, keening wails together.

Yisun's shamans told her it was the Oirat's fell magic that made such a seeming coincidence come to pass. It was a trick, deceit against the Tengri ... just as it had been deceit on Dobun's part so many millennia ago that had stripped the dragons from them. According to the legends of the Khahl, Dobun had fallen out of favor with his father, Borjigidal, and Borjigidal had decided that he would leave his throne and empire to his younger son, Duua. When Borjigidal neared his death, his dragon, the great lord Ag'iamon had left the city of Kharhorin in abject grief. Dobun had followed, meaning to bring Ag'iamon back, to use this hollow effort to convince his father to give him the throne. When he learned that Borjigidal had died before his return ... declaring Duua his most beloved child, and giving him the kingdom ... Dobun had been seized with envy and rage. He believed Ag'iamon had tricked him, cheating him of the throne by drawing him out of Kharhorin. For revenge, Dobun poisoned the dragon lord, and when Ag'iamon called all of the dragons from Ulus to rally against Dobun, Dobun lured them all beneath the mountains, sealing them below the earth in a subterranean prison. Dobun had revealed this secret lair to no one; he had died taking its location with him.

Though visions offered to Khahl shamans, however, the dragons had promised to return when called forth by the Negh, the one shamans promised would be born with the mark of the constellation, Dologhon ... seven sacred stars upon his breast. The Negh would be born to the rightful heir of the Ulusian throne, which as every Khahl who drew breath knew meant Duua's descendent, Targutai. When the time came for the dragons to return, Keiden, the wind spirit would send a golden falcon from the west to guide the Negh to their lair, and by his command, the dragons would rise once more.

Dobun had tricked the dragons in order to try and claim the throne; now, his rotted descendents, the Oirat had tried a similar ruse, calling upon Dobun's dark, fell spirit to arrange for the birth of his heir at the same time Yisun's own beloved Targutai.

"Umai, the womb goddess who distributes ami souls from the spirit tree in reincarnation must have been confused by this," Khidyr Shriagal, Yisun's yeke idugan, or female shaman had told Yisun. "For it is she who would have marked the Negh. The Oirat shamans surely called upon Dobun's wicked seni spirit, sent him among the boughs of the spirit tree to jar Umai's hand as she sent her mark."

Khidyr had known of these events, of Temuchin's birth and the mark of the seven upon him even before Targutai's umbilicus had been cut from his belly. "We can yet set this right," the idugan had promised, as Yisun had cradled her newborn son in her arms and sobbed with despair. "We will mark him ourselves ... that was Umai's intention. We will mark your Targutai with the seven sacred stars, and we will find this imposter, this false one and kill him. When Keiden sends the golden falcon from the west to guide the Negh, he will find only Targutai with the marks and lead him to the lair."

Khidyr and the royal shamans had burned the baby's chest; using a slim silver rod heated until aglow, they had seared the pattern of Dologhon into Targutai's breast.

It is for the good of the kingdom ... and the Khahl, Yisun had told herself, listening as her son screeched while his flesh cooked beneath the point of the rod. They had presented Targutai to the Khahl as the Negh promised by legend, and the people had rejoiced. Yisun and the shamans had kept their efforts secret, even from Bujiragh. Such might have been misjudgment in the end, though Yisun had always influenced Bujiragh on a strictly need-to-know basis. He acted more swiftly when he did not have much to ponder about a situation, but unfortunately, in this circumstance, Yisun's strategy had worked against her.

"Kill the baby in secret, then send forth your Minghan regiments. Destroy them all," she had whispered to Bujiragh, convincing him to send assassins to the Nuqut, into the aysil settlement of the Oirat royal Naiman tribe.

Bujiragh's had battled for so long, so fervently against the infant's father ... Dobun's descendent, Yesugei ... that without realizing Yisun's intentions in her encouragement, he had seized upon this chance to see his bitter enemy felled once and for all. The assassins had murdered Yesugei, and the Khahl's Minghan troops had marauded the village, but Yesugei's wife, the Oirat bitch-queen Aigiarn had escaped, taking her son with her ... alive and unscathed.

It was not a completely wasted effort, however. The Naiman tribe, the royal clans of the Oirat had been decimated in the attack. Among their straggled survivors, a shaman had been discovered. He had been brought to Kharhorin, and then was beaten and tortured until his tongue wagged loose of its moorings.

The Oirat had a map to the dragons' lair, the shaman told them. It was written in a language none among them could understand; supposedly the tongue of the ancient baga'han race, Dobun's wretched allies who had helped him imprison the dragons. Yesugei had sent out a scouting party into the Khar to try and find the lair. This map, scribbled by a half-crazed survivor of that doomed expedition, was the clue his desperate efforts had yielded.

Yesugei had been convinced of the map's authenticity, and that the Oirat who had drawn it had brought a piece of the lair's threshold with him, a scrap of stone with the same peculiar baga'han writing inscribed on it. Yesugei's wife, Aigiarn had taken this piece of stone and the map with her as she fled the Naiman aysil, and Yisun had been wise enough to realize that if the Oirat considered them of that much significance, there might be justifiable cause.

Bujiragh had not been interested or concerned with the map. He was occupied with being jealous of his

son, surly that Umai, the womb goddess, had given Targutai the mark of the Negh, and not him. "Have I not proven myself a worthy leader in the Tengri's regard?" he had demanded of Yisun. "Have I not duly earned such an esteemed honor as this? My people dance in the streets and celebrate an infant! Have they forgotten my years of triumph in their name? My victories over the Oirat? I saw Yesugei Bokeagha dead! It should have been mine ... a mistake has been made. I am not just some proffered seed for destiny's fulfillment. I should be the one who is the Negh!"

It had not taken Bujiragh long to learn of Yisun's ruse. Despite her best efforts to keep him from the baby, he had seen the marks upon Targutai and realized the child had not been born with them. He had beaten her for her deception, nearly throttling the life from Yisun with his strong hands, and as she had crumpled to the floor, gasping for breath, Bujiragh had sealed his own fate with his proud and spiteful tongue.

"Maybe I should wring the little pup's neck and see him dead ... burn marks into my own flesh and present myself to the people as the Negh," he had said. He had been a man fond of his qumis, and had been drunk. He had paced before her, his eyes ablaze, his fists closed and poised with murderous intent. "Such a lie has served you well, Yisun. Maybe I should try it myself."

Bujiragh had beaten her before. Yisun was well-accustomed to his explosive rage and the punishment his fists could mete forth. However, when he threatened Targutai, something within her had snapped loose and unfettered, and she had stared at him, her brows drawn, her gaze fixed upon a walking corpse too stupid to yet realize its own demise.

He had drunk himself into a stupor. Yisun had bided her time that night, summoning Bujiragh's favorite courtesans to him and bidding them to draw a warm bath to soothe him. The women had bathed him in the steaming water, rubbing his body with oils infused with jasmine until he had dozed off. Yisun had sent the courtesans away, and then while Bujiragh slept, his mind having succumbed to the sway of fermented milk, she had placed her hand against the cap of his skull, easing his face beneath the water. He had not struggled against her in the slightest, and she had held him there, her fingers hooked and tangled in his hair for the full measure of a large sandglass' passing.

It is for the good of the kingdom, she had thought, her eyes fixed upon the glass column, and the thin, steady trickle of powdered sand flowing through its narrow median. *And the Khahl.*

No one had ever known, and she had surely never told. It had seemed like nothing more than unfortunate circumstance. Yisun would like to think that despite this offense against Hulagu's son, the former Queen would have understood ... and approved ... of her actions, and would have likely undertaken them herself had she been in Yisun's stead.

"Take her out into the Urlug foothills and let the bergelmirs scavenge her flesh and thew," Yisun told Megetu when the Oirat girl had stopped struggling and hung limply in the eunuch's grasp. Megetu had been a bahadur, or commander, in the army of Yisun's father. He and more than twenty attendants, guards and slaves had accompanied Yisun from her tribe to the palace at Kharhorin so long ago, and for eighteen years, he had been one of her most trusted and constant companions. Megetu was tall, broad-shouldered, long-legged and strong, fiercely loyal to only Yisun and her interests.

Yisun had ordered the girl brought to her while the sky was still dark and full with the night. Khidyr had ripped open the front of the child's del and pressed her hands against the girl's stomach, her brows drawn, her eyes closed, her lips moving as she murmured in quiet, unintelligible counsel with her utha suld guide, an ancestor named Vachir. She had struck flints to several bowls of incense, filling the parlor with the mingling fragrances of aromatic smoke. Khidyr had wagged her little ceremonial drum in her hand,

turning the ash staff and driving the twin beads tethered by straps of sinew against the drum belly as though marking the cadence of her soft incantations.

The girl had been confused and frightened, weeping and sniveling as Khidyr touched her. Such displays of emotion were considered weak among Khahl women, who were brought up to be impassive and quiet, delicate in form and strong in spirit and resolve. Oirat women, by contrast, laughed and wept with pathetic abandon. This girl was only a child, younger even than Targutai, her breasts little more than feeble nubs easing their way forth to frame her heart, and yet there had been enough woman in her to foster life in her womb. Yisun had known this even before Khidyr had turned to her, her utha suld confirming what Yisun had suspected all along.

"She is with seed," Khidyr had said. "A boy child grows within her belly."

Targutai had been riding forth in the armed company of his Minghan Kelet soldiers, participating in minor raids against the Oirat during the last three months. This was not unsuitable to Yisun; he would be lord of dragons and men one day, and needed to hone skills and talents in battle if he was to reclaim the lands his ancestors had called their empire. He had taken the girl two weeks ago during such a raid deep within the Nuqut territory south of Tengri Lake, and was very proud of himself for the effort. Yisun had tried to impress upon him the prudence of selling the girl; she was an Oirat, and it was an offense against his Khahl forefathers to bring her to the palace. Targutai had been fond lately of offering small measures of defiance against his mother, spreading his fledgling wings as Kagan in his own right, and doing things as he saw fit—and that went against her advice. The girl had proven one such example. He had fancied her; he wanted her. He had defied Yisun and kept her.

Targutai had come to an age when he wavered between childhood and manhood, when the instincts of an adult had begun to stir within the slender frame and diminutive form of a boy. Several months earlier, Yisun had brought concubines to the palace for him, selecting a group of the most beautiful young women in all of Kharhorin to please and entertain him, and at first, they had seemed to pique his curiosity and interest. However, when Yisun's eunuchs began to report to her that Targutai was summoning the girl to his chamber every night and that he had abandoned the affections and company of his concubines, she had known all too well what her son was doing—and where it would lead.

She had not been surprised that the Oirat girl had become pregnant in such quick measure. Oirat women were alarmingly fertile; an idiosyncrasy in their desperate physiologies to compensate for hard lives in harsh environments that saw so many of their numbers dead. Because so many Oirat died during childhood, or fell in battle or enslavement to the Khahl, the Oirat made amends for this by having as many children as possible—and their bodies went along with this plan. They were like vermin; if you killed one, ten more came to take their place.

Trying to destroy the Oirat had proven for the Khahl as much an exercise in futility as Yisun's efforts to discourage Targutai's interest in the slave girl. For millennia, the Khahl had relentlessly pursued and fought the Oirat, succeeding in little more than forcing the Oirat to move deeper into the Nuqut territory and Khar mountains, making them more difficult to find and engage. The Khahl's efforts, rather than discourage or weaken the Oirat only saw them grow stronger, their resolve bolstered. Somehow this realization had escaped all of the Kagans before Targutai, including Bujiragh, but Yisun had recognized it all along. Sometimes the impetuous, aggressive natures of men simply prevented them from seeing those things readily and easily revealed to a woman who could exercise patience and restraint.

Yisun knew there would be no destroying the Oirat. She also knew that killing Temuchin Arightei was not the answer, either. Maybe the Oirat had summoned fell magic and orchestrated a ruse against Umai, the womb goddess to deceive her into giving the marks to Temuchin. Maybe the Tengri had given the

marks of the Dologhan to Temuchin as a means to test Targutai's strength, an exercise to prove his ultimate worthiness as the lord of dragons and men. Or maybe, Yisun realized, the Tengri had simply made a mistake.

She believed that the marks of Dologhan upon Temuchin's breast were rightfully Targutai's, but if a mistake had truly been made by their creators, it was a one the Tengri would likely not admit. They were infinite and omnipotent; one did not question their divine wisdom or the methods by which they shaped the destinies of men. If they had put the marks on Temuchin, to keep such an erring from being apparent, they would likely give him the powers of the Negh—to find the dragons' lair and call the dragons from their hibernation.

The Khahl could not vanquish the Oirat by force. The Oirat had grown clever and resilient for the Khahl's past attempts, and they had seized upon the good fortune their treachery against the Tengri had provided them. They meant to claim the dragons; they guarded and defended the little whelp Temuchin vigorously and fiercely.

Yisun had decided that if she could not defeat the Oirat, and if the Tengri meant for Temuchin Arightei to find and wake the dragons, then the most advantageous course of action for her—and for Targutai—was simply to let him. For thousands of years, both the Khahl and the Oirat had scoured the Khar mountain range, searching for the dragons' lair, and with the exception of Yesugei's undecipherable map, nothing had ever come of these attempts. Wherever the dragons had been hidden, it was somewhere deep and secret—and likely treacherous to reach.

Let the Oirat take such risks, Yisun had realized. Let them find the lair. They will only lead us to it.

She had let Targutai continue raids against the Oirats; all the better to keep Aigiarn on edge and unsuspecting of Yisun's true intentions. She sent spies among the Oirat tribes and aysils, returning captured Oirat to their friends and fellows with grim promises to harm loved ones yet imprisoned in Kharhorin should they fail her. She had dressed her own guards in the garb of the Oirat and sent them along to guarantee the Oirat spies' compliance and loyalty. They had reported back to her every movement of the Oirat and Yisun now kept meticulous track of their aysils and tribes as though she lived among them. Yisun had learned within a day of Aigiarn leaving the Uru'ut aysil along the shores of Qoyina Bay, accompanied by her bastard son, Temuchin, the Kerait tribal noyan, Toghrul Bagatur and some of their soldiers. She knew why they had left, as well—they were sailing west across the Chagan Sea, and south from there to the Torachan coastal city of Capua. Khidyr had predicted this in her visions; Yisun's spies had confirmed it. The time of the prophecy was at hand, and Aigiarn had gone to claim the golden falcon.

Let her, Yisun had thought. Let her go. Let her find the falcon. Let it lead her into the mountains—and us along with her.

Khidyr and Megetu had left Yisun's chamber some time ago; Megetu to tend to the disposal of the Oirat girl's body, and Khidyr, to meditation. Yisun sat upon a small, upholstered bench, lost in thought as her attendants twined long strands of her hair together in intricate plaits. Before she had taken her leave that morning, Khidyr had shared some tidings a bit more pressing and dark than Targutai's pregnant whore—visions her utha suld Vachir had showed Khidyr in her sleep. The yeke idugan had gone to seek further counsel with Vachir to see if more revelations might come to her.

"I saw a golden falcon aboard a fishing knarr out upon the sea, sailing eastward as though for home," she had told Yisun. "It was perched upon the arm of the false one, Temuchin Arightei, surrounded by a company of Oirat."

The visions Khidyr had seen could only mean one thing—the Oirat had found the fabled falcon in Capua, and were returning to Ulus with it. Yisun had sent out a large party of Targutai's Minghan guards to await their return, and tomorrow Yisun meant to send Targutai to join these soldiers.

Aigiarn will think she is safe, the moment of her whelp's fortunes at hand, Yisun thought as her attendants pulled and braided her hair. She will not take a large company of warriors with her. She would not risk drawing such notice, or leaving her people remaining within the aysils so unprotected. She will travel in light company to allow swift and secret passage—and we will follow her into the mountains, to the dragons' lair itself. When she has brought us to it, delivered Targutai to his destiny, then we will destroy Aigiarn and the false one and we will claim the dragons for ourselves.

"Where is she?" Targutai asked, startling Yisun from her musings. As the young Kagan marched into Yisun's quarters without the courtesy of knocking, the two girls behind Yisun paused in their work, wide-eyed with surprise.

"Where is Noyon?" Targutai demanded, stomping to a halt in front of Yisun, his brows drawn, his hands closed into small fists.

She realized he meant the little Oirat. She had never even known the girl's name until that moment. "I have sent her away," she said simply, meeting his gaze. He stood there staring at her, furious for a long moment and then he turned to the slave girls each in turn.

"Leave us," he snapped.

The two attendants lowered their heads respectfully and took their leave, their small feet whispering on the polished stone floor as they scurried for the chamber doors. Yisun and Targutai continued staring at one another until they were gone.

"Kindly do not order my servants about, Targutai," Yisun said.

"I am the Kagan," he replied. "They are my servants, Mother, to order about as I please."

He was a striking young man, his features delicate and deliberately formed, like his mother's. His eyes were small and dark, widely set, framed by austere brows. His mouth was thin and stern, his cheeks high and arched, his chin tapered and sharp. He wore his thick black hair long through the crown, so that it fell in glossy sheaves at his temples, framing his face. The sides of his head were shaved, the rest of his mane pulled back from the cap of his skull into a long, heavy plait spilling from the nape of his neck to below his shoulder blades. Whenever manhood came upon him in full, Yisun knew he would be a sight to behold and marvel over; as it was, Targutai was beautiful, and when he grew angry, when his brows pinched and his mouth turned down into a frown, it was easy to forget he was still only a child.

"I thought you went on a hunt this morning," she said.

"I told the hunters to wait," he said. "I am the Kagan. I can do that, as well. You did not send Noyon away. I know you did not."

"You are right," she said, nodding once.

Targutai blinked at her uncertainly, his ire wavering for a moment. "Then where is she?"

"She is dead," Yisun said. "I had her brought before me this morning and killed."

"What? Why did you do that?" Targutai said angrily. "She was mine. I found her. She belonged to me, not you. You had no right."

"She was an Oirat ... an enemy to us. I had every right."

"She was not an enemy. I liked her. She knew boku games ... bariqu and temecel. She would play pingachu with me, too."

"Is that what you would do with her in your chamber at night, Targutai?" Yisun asked, raising her brow. "The two of you would play temecel or pingachu?"

He blinked at her again, stricken to know she was aware of him.

"She was with child," Yisun told him, rising from her bench. "It would seem you were not very careful in your games with her, ko'un."

"With child...?" Targutai said quietly.

"Of course, I could not allow her to live," Yisun said. "What would you have of me? The heir of a Khahl Kagan in the belly of a lowly Oirat! Have shame, Targutai. Your ancestors would stir. Your father would rise from his tomb."

He lowered his eyes towards the toes of his shoes, shamed color stoking in his cheeks. "I ... but, Mother, I..."

She went to him and brushed her fingertips against his cheek, cradling the side of his face against her palm. "We have spoken of this, Targutai," she said quietly. "Your seed is a very special gift ... in all of the world, there is none more precious. You are the Kagan. You are the Negh."

He nodded, not raising his eyes. His hand traveled to his breast, his fingertips toying absently at the fastens along the left shoulder of his embroidered bufu. The clothing of the Khahl ... from simple fishermen to the Kagan himself ... all fastened either at the midline or the left shoulder; wearing vestments that lashed or fettered left to right ... as the Oirat did ... was considered the mark of barbarism. Beneath his satin surcoat and underlying jifu, the mark of the seven stars of Dologhon was still apparent in his flesh. Like every other Khahl in the Taiga region, Targutai did not know he had not been born with these marks; Yisun had never told even her own son the truth.

"I have made efforts to keep you from this," Yisun said. "Khidyr gives each of your concubines pessaries ... lambswool soaked in acacia seed powder and honey ... to collect your seed as it is delivered, to keep such circumstances as these from coming to pass. They are always ready when you feel need for pleasure, and..."

"I do not like it," Targutai said, his brows drawing together again. He ducked his head away from her hand. "It is sticky and it itches me. It smells peculiar, as well. And I do not like those women either. They do not please me and I am tired of them."

"Then I will find you others, ones who do please you."

He looked at her, his eyes flashing hotly. "Why can I not find my own? You choose everything for me. It is unfair. I am not a child! I can choose for myself."

"You did choose for yourself, Targutai," Yisun reminded him gently. "And look what has come to pass for it."

Targutai looked down at his shoes again, his lips pressing together in a thin, disconcerted line.

"You are not a child, Targutai, but you are still young," she said. "There are things you do not know yet, things you cannot understand. You will someday. Do you not trust me in the meantime?"

Targutai shrugged, keeping his gaze on the floor, his brows furrowed slightly. "I liked Noyon," he said. "She was my friend."

"She was not your friend," Yisun said, her voice growing sharp, making him hunch his shoulders. "She was an Oirat cur. She would have danced to see you defeated and the false one, Temuchin Arightei in your throne."

Targutai frowned, but said nothing. He was willful, but only so far, like a wolf cub eager to venture away from its den, but still dependant on its mother to protect it from the harmful potential of the world. He might growl or nip at her sometimes, but for the time being at least, when she snapped back, he was cowed.

She brushed her fingertips through his hair. Like any good wolf mother, she softened after offering rebuke, coddling her pup once more. "Content yourself with the concubines you have for now," she said. "When you return, I will send for more from the Khahl tribes, and you can choose from among them—as many as you would like, whichever please you."

"Return?" he asked, looking up at her. Again as a pup, Targutai was easily distracted; a carefully offered word, like a stick tossed among fallen leaves would draw his interest, and matters of inconsequence—like the Oirat girl—would be swiftly gone from his mind.

"Yes. Have I not told you? You will be leaving the palace tomorrow morning with Megetu and a jagun of one hundred Minghan guards."

He looked curious, his aggravation forgotten. "Where are we going?"

"To the west," Yisun said. "The Chagan Sea. Khidyr's visions have showed her it is time. The golden falcon has arrived. The Oirat have gone to claim it."

He frowned again, closing his hands in fists. "What do you mean, 'claim it?'" he said. "I am the Negh—that falcon is mine. They cannot have it."

"We will let them ... for now," Yisun told him. "It will lead them into the Khar mountains, to the dragons' lair, and we will follow them."

"Why do we not just take the falcon from them?" Targutai asked. "I am the one, not Temuchin Arightei. The falcon is supposed to come to me, lead me to the lair!"

He brushed past his mother, stomping toward the fireplace. He stood before the broad hearth, in the vermillion glow of the well-tended coals, glowering. "I hate him," he said. "I hate Temuchin Arightei. It is

not fair. Why would the Tengri send the falcon to him? You told me they burned the mark of the Dologha—my mark—into his skin to trick the falcon, fool the dragons. If the falcon has come to Temuchin, will the dragons, too?"

He drove the side of his fist angrily against the mantle. "It is not fair! It is my mark, my falcon, my dragons! What if they fall for his ruse, too? What if they think he is me?"

"They will not, Targutai," Yisun said softly. "The passage to the lair is surely dangerous and long. We will let the Oirat find it for us, face the dangers instead of us. You will follow them to the lair. They will travel in small numbers, and they will never suspect pursuit. You will have strong numbers with you—your finest warriors. I have already sent another jagun ahead; two hundred soldiers will stand at the ready for you, Targutai. You will destroy the Oirat before they see more than a glimpse of the sacred threshold."

He turned around and looked at her, his harsh expression softening into childlike anxiety. "You will not go with us, Mother?" he asked.

"No, Targutai," Yisun said. "I must remain here in Kharhorin. Lord Tertius cannot be trusted alone in our realm, and he will be suspicious if we leave together."

Aulus Livius Tertius was the tribunicia potestate, the civil head of the Ulusian state and consul for the Torachan empire. It was his responsibility to implement and enforce Torachan law within Ulus, and to monitor the activities of Torachan legions as they waged war against the Enghan to the north. Aulus had not been with them long, only a month. The last consul had been an agreeable sort of fellow Yisun had been easily able to manipulate to her point of view on politics and policies. Thus far, Aulus Tertius was proving a more difficult stone to crumble. He was arrogant and ambitious, contemptuous of the Ulusian people ... whom he considered to be barbaric and backward ... and resentful of the empire's decision to send him to Kharhorin. Yisun would no more leave him unattended in her palace ... and her kingdom ... than she would have let the Oirat whore continue laying in rut with her son.

Targutai still looked uncertain. The Khar mountain range was one of the smallest in the Morthir, but also one of the most treacherous and imposing; a snowcapped, cragged granite border nearly two hundred miles long and almost one hundred miles in girth at its widest point, between the pine forest foothills and steppes of Ulus to the east and the high desert and coastal plains of Lydia to the west. It was a long journey by horseback across the Taiga region of Ulus to the forks of Sube off the Chagan Sea, and then an even longer trek southward into the mountains themselves. He had been away from his mother and his home before, on hunts or raids in the Nuqut region, but never for more than a few days at a time, and never approaching such daunting circumstances.

Yisun had her own misgivings as well, though they did not reflect in her face, her voice. She had sheltered and coddled Targutai near to her for so long, the prospect of sending him out into the Bith ... even accompanied by two hundred warriors ... frightened her. The empire could not have picked a worse time to send a new tribunicia potestate to them, forcing her to remain in Kharhorin just when she needed to leave the most. "You are nearly a man now, Targutai," she told him. "And soon, you will embrace your destiny. When you return to Kharhorin, it will be as the lord of dragons and men. It is time for you to make such a journey without me." *And I know that you will be safe among the Minghan and with Megetu at your side to protect and defend you.*

Targutai smiled at her, pleased by the praise. The trepidation drained from his face, and he straightened his shoulders somewhat, raising his chin, his ego stoked. "I want to kill Temuchin," he said. "I want to drive my scimitar through that rotted false mark on his chest and spear his heart beneath ... I want to be the one, Mother."

The corner of Yisun's mouth fluttered in what might have been the proud semblance of a smile as she regarded her son, this wolf cub she had raised and weaned, who stood before her now, bold and eager.

“And so you shall be, Targutai,” she told him.

* * * *

Aulus Livius Tertius sat at his writing desk that morning, wearing his heavy wool great coat over his clothes and gloves on his hands. He had moved the desk, positioning it in front of his chamber's broad hearth, and stoked the fire until fully ablaze, the flames lapping and dancing against the heaped wood.

His dog, an enormous grey mastiff named Caeruleus lay on the floor, basking in the heat of the fire, her large head resting against her paws, her jowls draping toward the floor. He had taken to sleeping with Caeruleus in his bed, a practice he might have ordinarily found distasteful had he lived anywhere but Ulus. The realm was cold ... bloody damn cold at that ... and the dog was warm. Agreeable etiquette in such circumstance seemed moot.

Snow fell again last night, Aulus wrote in his journal. His hand quivered with chill, despite the fleece-lined, hide gloves. He had been born and raised in Corcyra, a southern province of the city of Serdica, a place of balmy, striking contrast to the Taiga region. Aulus had not been warm since his arrival in Kharhorin; he doubted that he would be again any time soon.

It is now to my elbow if I were to cleave a path through it in the courtyard beyond my quarters. In places where it has drifted against the walls, it is above my head in height. How I loathe the sight of it. If any place in the whole of the Bith could test a man's faith in the benevolence of our Mater Matris ... the divine Mother Creator ... then surely, this is it.

Until two months ago, Aulus had enjoyed a perfectly predictable life in Serdica. He had been an exactor ... a tax collector for the imperial treasury. It had not been a position that made him beloved among the people, certainly, but it had settled Aulus in an esteemed sort of regard with the leaders in Cneas. He was a diligent servant to the empire and a man who fastidiously adhered to rules and laws. When he had been summoned to Cneas to appear before the Dioecetes ... the official treasurer of the Torachan empire ... Aulus had been tremulous with eager anticipation. He had been hoping his efforts and dedication might see him awarded with a promotion, an appointment to the position of dispensator, or some other post of importance. He had been rather startled and dismayed to instead be appointed the Ulusian tribunicia potestate by the empire, a post he was due to hold for two years.

Two years in Ulus, Aulus had thought to himself, studying a map in the library of his meager flat in Serdica, staring glumly at the dismal latitude of the little northern realm. Nearly straight away, he had entertained thoughts of impaling himself on his dagger.

I do not know how long I can bear this place ... this cold and desolate wasteland the empire seems to hold in such esteemed regard, he wrote. It is a worthless land, and an even more worthless people. I am so desperate for the familiar contours of Torachan features, I have considered taking a mirror with me in my pocket, if only to gaze upon my own face and find some semblance of home within the glass. I must say that I now agree with my predecessor's observations of the Khahl, as well as those of my Praetorius, Decimus Aemilius Paulus ... the Torachan face and figure are far more comely than those of the Ulusians. The flat noses, bowed mouths and angular eyes drain any semblance of beauty from Ulusian women of common birth, and of those noble ones deemed lovely here at the palace, the melancholy that seems to ever grip them detracts more than anything else. Though I cannot rightly fault them their misery ... they have spent their lives in this place, this wretched realm. I have only spent five weeks in full and already share in their

despair.

A knock fell against his door. Caeruleus raised her head, her floppy ears perked, her lips fluttering slightly as she offered a soft, *whoofing* belch of air. Aulus raised his gaze. "Yes?" he called out. The tip of his nose felt leaden with cold, his sinuses congested with thick fluid. He was surprised he could not see his snuffled breath hanging on the air before him.

His steward, Faustus entered from the adjacent antechamber, lowering his head in respectful deference. "Begging your pardon, my Lord Tertius," he said.

Faustus was Torachan, like Aulus, though his company offered little if any comfort to the consul. Faustus was his slave, bought and paid for ten years earlier, his face marked with a large tattoo wrapped about his left brow and cheek with the symbol of a Cneasan catasta. He was illiterate, uneducated, courteous and aloof in his duties ... about as much company as a dead and putrifying hound.

Slaves and soldiers, Aulus thought with a frown. *That is what the empire would see me spend my days surrounded by ... bloody damn slaves and soldiers.*

"I am busy, Faustus," Aulus told the steward, wagging his feathered plume demonstratively. "And I distinctly recall asking not to be disturbed."

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said, nodding his chin. "But I thought you should know, my lord ... her imperial majesty, the Qatun'Eke seeks counsel with you."

Aulus' frown deepened. Yisun Goyaljin, the Qatun'Eke or Queen Mother of Ulus seemed to serve no other purpose in life except to make herself a nuisance to him. Maybe his predecessor, Tiberius Crassus had not minded her incessant meddling, her coy attempts to sway and influence the implementation of empire policy in Ulus, but it had been stupidity on Crassus' part to heed her counsel ... foolishness that had resulted in his removal from the position.

The Torachan Senate had decreed that all states within the empire must convert from whatever native pagan religions they had once called their own to the worship of the Torachan Mother Creator, the Mater Matris. Viatoris ... missionaries from the empire ... had established temples throughout Kharhorin and other northern Ulusian cities, but Tiberius Crassus had made no great effort to see the Khahl's pagan temples, their totems and practices of their crude, rudimentary religion destroyed and suppressed, as was imperial mandate.

Likewise, all manner of indigenous dress was to be replaced among the states by the civilized, stately fashions of the Torachan. Each state had five years from the time of assimilation into the empire to adhere to this policy; again, Crassus had done nothing to keep the Ulusians from donning their customary vestments ... their furlined robes and gowns, sashes about their heads, heavy boots or satin slippers upon their feet.

Aulus had no doubt that Yisun Goyaljin had some part to play in these instances. The Khahl might have revered their spoiled, petulant boy-king, Targutai Bokedei, but Aulus was neither so ignorant, nor naïve. Targutai's mother, Yisun ruled Ulus; it was power and authority she was both accustomed to wielding, and unwilling to part with. She had been able to coax and persuade Crassus into disregarding the laws of the empire, and he had been shipped back to Cneas for his failures.

That was the reason Aulus was there. The Imperial Pater Patriae and the Senate had felt the Ulus state needed a firmer hand as its consul; a man who, unlike Crassus, was willing to do what was necessary to

see rules enforced, laws executed. Aulus Tertius, humble Serdican exactor, had been exactly the sort of man they had in mind for the position of tribunicia potestate ... a man of action and determination, who could see imperial mandates fulfilled.

Though maybe it is me who is stupid, not Tiberius Crassus, Aulus thought. I am the one nearly mummified with cold, while he is somewhere south in the empire, likely being suckled by a fetching concubine, laughing at his own good fortune. I should take his philosophy to heart ... whatever Yisun wants, let her have it. Being sent back to Torach in shame is surely a better fate than having to live another two years in Ulus.

"What does Yisun want?" Aulus asked Faustus.

"I do not know, my lord," Faustus replied. "She seems most cordial in her calling."

I bet she does, Aulus thought. He had always felt distinctly ill-at-ease around Yisun, and did not soften his guard in her company. Her voice always conveyed respect and warmth, but he had never seen her smile or laugh; her lovely face seemed frozen in a perpetual mask of apathy. He had been told that this was conditioned among Khahl women since very early childhood, but Aulus found it unnerving nonetheless. Yisun brought to his mind a serpent kept as a pet; lovely enough, and sometimes fond to drape about your neck in seeming affection ... but always regarding you with a cold, calculating glint in its eyes, as though imagining what you tasted like beneath the thin covering of your flesh.

"Shall I show her in, my lord?" Faustus asked.

"I suppose since you have fairly well made it evident to her that I am here, it would be the height of poor manners to invent some pretense to the contrary," Aulus told the slave, frowning at him. "On the next occasion that I tell you I am not to be disturbed, Faustus, I expect you to offer excuses for me ... no matter who pays call."

Faucus seemed unoffended, nearly bored by Aulus' sharp words and admonishing tone. "Yes, my lord," he said, lowering his face politely. He stepped back across the threshold and into the antechamber.

Aulus shook his head, laying his quill aside and closing the cover of his journal. "Slaves and soldiers," he said to Caeruleus, who tilted her head to look up at him. "At least the bloody soldiers have tales of campaigns and battles from the Engjold to share. Slaves have nothing but blank, ignorant stares and murmured courtesies to offer."

The dog, who had little more going for her, merely blinked at him, her tongue lolling out of her mouth.

Part of the reason the Ulus had been allowed to dance about many of the empire's decrees for so long was because the territory was considered of minor import to Cneas. Ulus bridged the gap between the Torachan states and the Engjold region to the north. Engjold was not part of the empire; it was a broad and imposing breadth of land inhabited by the Enghan ... a race of primitive, barbaric tribes who fiercely resisted any attempts by Torach to claim them. The eastward passage into Engjold through the Torachan state of Galjin was blocked by the impassable natural barrier of the Uslug mountains, but the expansive steppelands and pine forests of the Ulusian Taiga region provided ready and relatively easy access by Torachan phalanxes. This geographical distinction gave Ulus an advantage of sorts in the empire, and the Senate and Imperial Pater Patriae were more than willing to concede a bit in their policies, if only to keep the Khahl placated and pleased in their partnership. This fact was not lost upon Yisun, Aulus was certain; the Qatun'Eke likely used these fortuitous circumstances to her full and utmost benefit.

Faustus returned to the chamber, standing in the doorway and averting his gaze toward the toes of his heeled shoes as Yisun Goyaljin entered. Aulus had to admit that Yisun was a beautiful woman. Her face had a sort of exotic haughtiness about it; her visage, her very presence reminded him a field laden with snow ... pristine in its beauty, painful in its icy bearing. Her black hair had been plaited and bundled against the nape of her neck; her slim, petite figure had been wrapped in an ivory and gold changshan dress, with a high-necked, long-sleeved robe fastened atop. The robe's long rear panels of embroidered satin whispered against the granite floor as she moved across the room, as elegant as a swan gliding on a current of water, her shoulders and spine poised gracefully erect.

"Ogluni mend, Lord Tertius," Yisun said, coming to a halt before him. *Good morning.*

She did not lower her gaze to the floor in any affectation of courtesy; atypical habit for the usually demure Khahl women, but not for the Qatun'Eke, who was likely the most proud and willful woman Aulus had ever encountered.

"Good morrow, my Lady Goyaljin," Aulus said, rising from his seat. He pressed his hands against the rumpled folds of his cravat that poked out from beneath his great coat lapels and offered her a little bow. "What an unexpected but pleasant surprise to see you."

"Forgive my intrusion, Lord Tertius," Yisun said. "My son, his majesty the Kagan is preparing a party to ride south along the Onon River for a hunt. I thought you might wish to join them this morning. My Kagan has expressed that he would dearly enjoy your company."

I find that difficult to believe, Aulus thought. In the five weeks since his arrival, he had probably exchanged no more than two dozen words with the Kagan, Targutai Bokedei. Targutai's vocabulary seemed limited to obstinate demands and self-serving imperatives, all punctuated emphatically with "I," "me" or "mine."

He spared a glance toward his patio windows. The snow had drifted so deeply against the glass panes that had he somehow managed to wrestle the door open, he would have been standing to his shoulders in it. The last place in the bloody wide Bith Aulus wanted to be in such weather was out in the midst of it ... much less wearing calluses upon his buttocks by spending the day saddled on a loping horse or bergelmir, one of the enormous, stocky weasels the Khahl and Enghan had domesticated into beasts of burden.

"It is a kind offer and a gracious invitation, my lady," he said, turning to Yisun again and forcing a smile. "But begging the Kagan's pardon, I think I shall pass."

"My Kagan wished me to tell you, as well, my lord, that he will be leaving Kharhorin at dawn tomorrow, along with a jagun of his Minghan guards for a longer, more extensive hunt," Yisun said.

"A jagun?" Aulus said. This was a regiment of one hundred Khahl soldiers, a seemingly inordinate number to bring along on a hunting venture. The Khahl kept a modest army of less than one thousand in Kharhorin. These were meant to serve Aulus ... not Targutai ... in the realm, supplementing the continuous influx of Torachan guards in affairs of domestic security. The Khahl soldiers, called Minghan, helped to suppress and foil uprisings among the southern Oirat tribes, who were considered enemies of the empire because the stubborn barbarians refused to submit to Torachan rule. "Where in the Bith are they going, my lady ... to the Bara'Qadan mountains?"

"Only so far west as the Chagan Sea, if you would care to join them," she replied. "They shall likely be gone three weeks, perhaps a month. It is an annual occasion for them."

This struck Aulus as peculiar. From what he had observed of Yisun and her son, it seemed uncharacteristic for the Qatun'Eke to condone such a lengthy absence for Targutai. She coddled and guarded the young Kagan fiercely, consenting to only infrequent, short hunting trips with the soldiers, or letting him participate in raids against the Oirat.

Then why would she let him go out into the wilderness in the middle of winter for a month? he thought, perplexed.

Another odd circumstance was the sheer number of guards accompanying Targutai. True, this might account for Yisun's willingness to allow him to go ... surely no harm would befall the boy in such a large company, but it had not escaped Aulus' notice that several weeks ago, another jagun of Khahl Minghan had been dispatched from the city. Yisun had offered that they had left following reports of Oirat activity in the west. Aulus had been new enough to his post at that time not to question such activities, but now he felt comfortable in harboring some suspicions and doubts ... particularly since these Minghan had not yet returned to Kharhorin to his knowledge.

"Again, I must beg pardon," Aulus told Yisun. "Forgive me, my lady. My southern constitution does not seem to favor the harsh measure of your winters. I do not think I would enjoy or benefit from such a trek."

She nodded once, and though her facial expression did not shift in the slightest, Aulus felt the downy hairs along the nape of his neck, beneath the gathered horsehair of his powdered wig's dapper little tail suddenly stir. Being an exactor had helped hone Aulus into a fairly astute judge of character; he had heard every line, lie and lament one could utter as to why they could not remit their taxes in timely fashion or in full. He could not explain why, but he suddenly had the distinct impression that Yisun had known he would refuse the invitation, and that she had extended it with some other purpose in mind.

"I will send word to him then, my lord," Yisun said.

She is playing at something, Aulus thought.

"Have you received any word from Praetorius Paulus lately, Lord Tertius?" Yisun asked him.

"Not of late, I have not, no, my lady," Aulus said. He had, in fact, received correspondence from Decimus Aemilius Paulus, the praetorius ... or leader ... of the Torachan legions stationed in Ulus only the day before, a hastily scrawled message in the soldier's crooked, nearly unintelligible hand delivered by courier kestrel shortly before lunchtime. Paulus and several hundred Torachan legionnaires were currently camped in the Engjold territory north of the Ulus border, west of the Sverd'vatn bay.

Aulus was an imperial official, not a warrior, and whatever motivations might have convinced the empire that the lands of Engjold were worth ten years of such trying effort were beyond his fathoming. The blockade and siege tactics that had helped build the Torachan empire elsewhere in the Morthir had little effect on the people of Engjold. The Enghan were also fierce warriors, specializing in close, brutal combat, a tactic neighboring Morthirian realms had not practiced, and one that often left the Torachan legions ... unaccustomed to prolonged, bloody, hand-to-hand battles ... trounced.

"We are getting better, though," Paulus had assured Aulus, not assuaging his misgivings in the least. Paulus had been at a loss to explain why the empire wanted Engjold; Aulus suspected it was simply to prove a point ... if they wanted something, then by the Good Mother, they should be able to take it.

Paulus and his forces were currently tracking a large movement of Enghan toward Sube, but their efforts were hampered by the weather and the cragged, inhospitable terrain of Engjold. Paulus did not expect to return to Kharhorin for at least another month, if not two.

Yisun did not need to know this; the affairs of the empire were none of her concern, and Aulus certainly was not going to be the one to share them with her. He watched her intently as he offered her reply. Again, there was no alteration in her expression, but he was fairly certain that she knew about the letter, and likely bloody knew its contents, as well. He was willing to wager there was precious little that occurred within the palace ... or the state of Ulus, for that matter ... that Yisun remained unaware of for very long.

She is playing at something, he thought again. But what?

"I hope that your soldiers fare well in the north," Yisun said. "The Enghan can be very brutal in defense of their territories."

"How is it that the Khahl have never engaged them more heatedly, my lady?" Aulus asked. "Your races have been neighbors for millennia."

Yisun nodded her chin once. "My Kagan's ancestor, Borjigidal Altantei once conquered a great portion of the Morthir," she said. "Including much of the lands your empire now seeks to claim in Engjold. But in the ages since, we allowed the Enghan to secede it back from us. We among the Khahl learned that we cannot always take what we want simply because of perceived entitlement."

He looked at her for a long moment, his brow raised slightly. "If my history tutelage serves well, my lady, your ancestor's empire collapsed ... the Engjold lands returned to the Enghan ... because your leaders were too weak to hold it fast," he said. "We among the Torachans have learned that you can always take what you want when you are strong enough to keep it."

For the first time since his arrival in Khorhorin, Aulus saw something flicker across the cool exterior of Yisun's visage. For one fleeting moment, her full lips seemed to purse, the flawless skin beneath her left eye crimping slightly.

"I will offer your regrets to my Kagan, Lord Tertius," she told him, any ire that had clouded her face momentarily unreflected in her voice. "He will be disappointed, but will understand."

Two hundred Khahl Minghan were making their way west in the company of the boy they still considered to be their ruler. Yisun had offered him an invitation he suspected she had known he would decline, as though she sought to quell any anxieties their abrupt and unexpected departure might have brought him. She had inquired innocently enough after Decimus Paulus and the legionnaires, but Aulus thought she had meant to confirm that the Torachan soldiers would be tarried north of the Taiga for awhile yet, that Targutai and the Minghan would not happen upon them by chance as they returned from Engjold to Kharhorin.

What are you playing at? Aulus thought, meeting Yisun's gaze. What is in the west that is of such great and sudden importance that you would go to all of this trouble ... all of this secrecy?

"I appreciate that, my lady," he said to her, pressing his fingertips against the lapel of his great coat and lowering his eyes toward the ground respectfully. "Good morrow to you, then."

"Yes," Yisun said with a nod. It was as close to deference as Aulus was likely to receive from her.

“Good morning, Lord Tertius.”

She turned on the narrow heel of her silk slipper and strode toward the door, her posture immaculate, the hem of her robe swishing against the floor in her wake. Aulus watched her leave, his brows furrowed slightly, his mouth turned down in a frown.

"What are you playing at, Yisun?" he murmured to himself. He glanced down at his dog, and found she had nothing to offer him in reply.

Chapter Thirteen

THE FALCON ARRIVES

Temuchin tried very hard to do as Yeb had asked of him; to sit still aboard the knarr beneath the canopy covering his pallet, and to be very quiet and diligent in his concentration. He had kept the ongons ... Ogotai's and Yesugei's ... enfolded in his hands, and he had sat with his legs crossed before him, his face lowered toward the nest of his lap. He had closed his eyes for awhile and whispered to the ongons, trying to do as Yeb instructed, to be aware only of the influence of his father's spirit upon him.

"Please, Father," he had breathed. "Please show Ogotai what you showed me. Show him the man, Rhyden Fabhcun. Show Ogotai where to go, what to do. Please, Father."

He tried very hard, but his mind was anxious; it did not want to grow quiet or still. The longer Aigiarn, Toghrul, Yeb and the Kelet were gone, the more restless and worried he became, and the harder it became for him to concentrate. Yeb had tried to teach him how to meditate in the past, with similar futile results. Temuchin had been aggravated and disheartened by these efforts, but Yeb had merely smiled at him in reassurance.

"You are young, Temu," he had reminded. "Your mind is curious and alert. Respite for you comes with learning and knowledge. I am older and sometimes with age, you have learned enough to enjoy moments of quiet thought, with only yourself and your utha for counsel."

Temuchin felt frustrated and angry with himself that he would fail Yeb now; that when it was something important, his mind would stubbornly refuse to obey him. He kept finding himself distracted by the soft, undulating motions of the knarr beneath him as it bobbed on the water, the murmured conversations of the Kelet and Uru'ut beyond the canopy as they took supper together, the golden light and shadows of torchlight from nearby pier pilings dancing against the belly and deck of the boat. Sound traveled well across the broad expanse of Lunan Bay, and he could hear distant noises from other longboats tied at the wharf and the Torachan tall ships out upon the harbor. Faint restrains of music and laughter found his ear, drifting inland from out upon the water; the soft sounds of voices, fiddles and pipes, as though a party of some sort was underway on one of the decks of a distant ship.

His mind was attracted by these sights and sounds, his focus waning to curiosity. Every time he heard voices close at hand, or the resonant thrumming of footsteps upon the pier, he would open his eyes, lift his head, his concentration broken as he anxiously wondered if it was his mother returning, if they had found Rhyden Fabhcun, the golden falcon, or whatever it was they seemed meant to find that night.

Several long hours passed, and when at last, Temuchin heard one of the Uru'ut say, "They are coming," he sprang to his feet, ducking from beneath the overhanging canopy, his eyes flown wide, his heart

pounding in nervous rhythm.

"They are back, Jelmei?" he asked one of the Kelet as he hopped onto one of the benches, rising onto his tiptoes and craning his head back to look along the length of the pier toward the city. The other Oirat aboard the knarr had risen as well, their suppers and shared qumis forgotten. In the distance, approaching them, Temuchin could see a large group of silhouetted figures walking hurriedly along the pier. Several of the Kelet had already clambered onto the dock from the knarr and strode to meet them, their hands resting lightly, warily against the hilts of their scimitars.

"I think so, Temu, yes," Jelmei replied. He placed his hand protectively against the small of Temuchin's back to steady the boy as he perched precariously on the bench while the knarr listed back and forth beneath them.

Temuchin frowned. It was difficult to discern who was whom among the approaching group; the torches set along the pier seemed to cast more shadows than light, but he counted heads and realized there were only thirteen people. Thirteen had left ... his mother, Toghrul, Yeb and ten of the Kelet. If they had found Rhyden Fabhcun, convinced him to come with them, there would have been an extra person among them.

Oh, no, he thought, dismayed. Something has happened ... something went wrong. It is my fault. I did not try hard enough, lost my concentration, and nothing was revealed to Ogotai. Yeb could not find Rhyden Fabhcun, and they have given up. It is all my fault.

As they drew closer, and the Kelet from the knarr reached them, Temuchin saw that one of the guards in his mother's company carried something draped in shadows against his chest, a large roll of blankets. The Oirat traveled nowhere unprepared. The men of their tribes seldom went far without most of their essential belongings fettered to their bodies somewhere. They never removed their swords and knives; their bog'cu pouches always contained flints, sharpening stones, sinew thread, bone sewing needles, small portions of dried meat and burlagh milk powder pressed between leaves for emergency rations. They also carried at least one blanket or fur each, bundled tightly and slung across their back. Temuchin wondered why they had removed and unfurled their blankets, why they carried them in their hands instead of on their shoulders.

He watched one of the Kelet from the knarr take the cumbersome bundle from the approaching guard. They seemed very deliberate and careful in this exchange, as though passing something heavy but fragile between them. Temuchin heard his mother's voice, Aigiarn saying, "Be easy with him. Keep his head against your shoulder."

"Oh, no," Temuchin whimpered in sudden, dismayed realization. It was Rhyden Fabhcun with them, wrapped in wrapped in the furs, apparently unconscious or injured. They had found him after all, but something had happened. They had hurt Rhyden to bring him with them, and Temuchin found his voice choked with distraught disbelief, tears suddenly burning in his eyes.

As the party drew closer, he saw Aigiarn walking briskly, close to the guard who held Rhyden cradled in his arms. He saw Yeb just behind Aigiarn; Toghrul walked uncharacteristically distant from them, near the back of the group. Toghrul seldom left Aigiarn's side unless she did something to aggravate or anger him ... which she was prone to doing ... and Temuchin wondered what had happened to upset Toghrul.

"Mamma!" Temuchin cried out, drawing Aigiarn's attention. "Mamma, what has happened? What have you done?"

"Oyotona, get down from that bench," Aigiarn said, as she came to stand at the edge of the pier overlooking the knarr. "Jelmei, help him down. He will fall."

Temuchin squirmed in protest as Jelmei hooked his arm about the boy's slender waist and pulled him gently, easily down from the seat. Aigiarn squatted, holding onto a piling as she kicked her legs out and down, hopping into the boat.

"Mamma, what happened?" Temuchin cried again.

"Nakhu, help," she said to one of the Kelet, turning to look back up toward the pier, ignoring her son for the moment. She flapped her hands at Nakhu as he came to stand beside her. Above them, the guard carrying Rhyden knelt at the side of the pier. "Take him, Nakhu," she said. "Gently now. Be very careful with him."

Nakhu reached up toward his fellow Kelet, drawing the lifeless form of Rhyden Fabhcun against his chest. At the movement, the blankets drew back from about Rhyden's face, and Temuchin could see him, the familiar features he had dreamed of. Rhyden's eyes were closed, but his brows lifted as he moaned softly, and Temuchin whimpered again, frightened at the sound of his quiet, feeble voice. Rhyden squirmed, moving his arms, and Temuchin saw that his hands were bound together, lashed with thick cords at the wrists.

"What are you doing?" he cried to Aigiarn, shrugging away from Jelmei's grasp and darting toward his mother. "What have you done to him?"

"Temuchin, get back," Aigiarn said, reaching out and stopping his advance with her arm.

"He is hurt!" Temuchin exclaimed, bewildered and frightened. "You hurt him, Mamma! Why did you hurt him?"

"We did not, Temu," Yeb said, dropping over the side of the pier and into the boat. He clapped his hand against Temuchin's shoulder, staying him, drawing his confused gaze while Aigiarn and the Kelet brought Rhyden toward the stern of the knarr. Another hide canopy had been drawn here; Aigiarn and Toghrul had been using the little alcove for their sleeping place aboard the boat. A pallet of blankets and furs had been arranged, and as Nakhu ducked his head beneath the edge of the hide, Temuchin heard Aigiarn say to place Rhyden on the bed, to tuck the blankets about him.

"It is him, is it not, Yeb ... Rhyden Fabhcun?" Temuchin asked, staring up at the yeke shaman, stricken.

"Yes," Yeb said, nodding. "Someone found him before we could, Temu. A bad man, with worse intentions. Do not be frightened. He is alright now ... safe with us."

Yeb walked to the stern, stepping briskly over benches in his way. As Nakhu backed out from beneath the canopy, his arms empty, Yeb ducked within, kneeling beside Aigiarn on the pallet.

"What have they done to him, Yeb?" Aigiarn asked, as Temuchin followed Yeb and stood behind them, wide-eyed and afraid.

"I do not know yet," Yeb replied quietly. He drew the blankets away from Rhyden's head, and Temuchin uttered a soft, anguished cry to see that his hair had been shorn; the heavy mane Temuchin had dreamed of, the thick sheaf of hair that had fallen to Rhyden's waist had been cut at the nape of his neck. Temuchin cried out again, tears spilling down his cheeks as he realized something had happened to

Rhyden's face, as well; a dark, twisting mark had been drawn on his fair skin, the sharp angles of his cheek and brow. Temuchin had seen the mark before; it looked like the one on Maidar's face ... Toghrul's wife, and Belgutel's mother. He knew what it was ... the mark of a slave ... and he knew it was permanent, that it could never fade or wash away.

"No...!" he gasped, distraught. Aigiarn turned to him, her expression softening to see the horror in his face. She stood and went to her son, enfolding him in her arms.

"It is alright, oyotona," she whispered, kissing his hair.

"But they hurt him," Temuchin said, trembling against her.

"Bugu Yeb will make it right," she soothed. "You will see. Come away now, let Yeb tend to him."

"No, Mamma," Temuchin said in protest as Aigiarn drew him away. "No, Mamma, please...!"

"It is alright," she said again.

There was suddenly a flurry of activity aboard the knarr. Aigiarn deposited Temuchin at the stem of the longboat, beneath his canopy, in his pallet. He lay on his side and watched the Oirat unfetter the knarr from the pier and shove it away into the water. The Uru'ut lined up between the benches in the middle of the boat, hefting their long, heavy oars in hand and steering the knarr away from the wharf, out into the harbor. They stood as they rowed, moving back and forth two broad steps for every rotating heave of the oars, while another pair of Uru'ut tended to the rudder along the right stern side of the boat, guiding them out on the water.

He could see Yeb on the far side of the boat, gleaning occasional glimpses of him between shoulders and hips of the Oirat as they moved about. Yeb knelt beside Rhyden, and Aigiarn stood behind him, watching as he worked. Yeb moved his hands toward Rhyden's face, and Temuchin heard Rhyden cry out in an unfamiliar language ... likely the Gaeilgen tongue he had mentioned in Temuchin's dream.

"Athair ... Athair, cuidiann tu me ... le ... le do thoil..." he pleaded, his voice hoarse and frail. He might not have understood the language, but Temuchin knew who Rhyden called out to nonetheless; the word was similar enough to the Torachan common tongue, and there were simply those that people called out for universally when frightened or in pain ... their mother or, as in this instance, their father.

"Athair ... le do thoil ... ta ... ta me eagla..." Rhyden begged, and Temuchin felt tears roll down his cheeks as he lay curled on his side beneath his blankets, listening to the poor young man cry for his father. Rhyden quieted as Yeb spoke to him, comforting him. Temuchin could not hear his words, but he listened to the sounds of the gentle rhythm and resonance of Yeb's voice and tried to find his own comfort in them.

Aigiarn walked toward Temuchin. He watched her pause and say something briefly, quietly to Toghrul. Toghrul did not look angry, but his expression was fixed in a stern set, and when she reached for his hand, he pulled away from her.

"Tell that to the tribes when Ghaqai ... the twelfth month ... is upon us and our people go hungry," he said in a sharp tone as he turned and walked away. "We will not need the dragons if none of us survive."

Aigiarn looked troubled and unhappy as she walked toward Temuchin again. She ducked her head beneath the canopy, and some of the melancholy lifted as she met Temuchin's gaze and smiled for him.

"Sain bainuu," she said softly. *Hello.*

"Is Rhyden alright, Mamma?" Temuchin asked.

She lay down on the pallet in front of him, tucking her arm beneath her head so that her cheek rested against her elbow, and her opposite shoulder blocked Temuchin's view of the knarr deck. "I think so. Yeb is tending to him."

"He is calling for his father," Temuchin said softly, his face filled with sorrow.

Aigiarn brushed the cuff of her fingers against his cheek. "They gave him something that has made him sleepy and confused," she said. "He does not understand what is happening to him."

Temuchin still looked troubled and she smiled again. "He is an Elf, Temu," she said. "He is from a land to the west, across the sea, a place called Tiralainn." She said *Elf* and *Tiralainn* slowly, deliberately pronouncing the unfamiliar words. "All of his people, the Elves of Tiralainn have ears like he does ... pointed at the top. They do not like to travel. He is the first one ... the only one ... who has ever crossed the sea, come to the Morthir. Yeb met him earlier tonight, and spoke with him. He said that there are Abhacan who live in Tiralainn, too ... baga'han, Temu, like the ones who hid the dragons. Rhyden Fabhcun knows the Abhacan. He can speak their language, read it. Yeb showed him an ash rubbing of Yesugei's box, the stone that came from the threshold of the lair, and he said it says *she shall pass* ... just like the legends of Ag'iamon's promise."

She reached out, closing her fingers gently against Temuchin's hand. "You were right, oyotona. He can read the map and show us the way. His name is *falcon* with true purpose ... he is the one who will lead us to the lair."

"He is frightened of us," Temuchin said unhappily.

"We are strangers to him," Aigiarn said. "And his mind is dazed. He does not understand."

"What happened to him?" he asked.

"We were trying to arrange for a boat to bring us to his ship from the pier. Yeb walked away from us and found him. He spoke to him for a few moments; Yeb said he was very kind. When he and his friend left the waterfront, Yeb followed them to a tavern ... a place where men go to drink ale ... and then he came to show me and Toghrul." She offered Temuchin's hand a little squeeze. "While Yeb left Rhyden Fabhcun to find us, something happened to him. Somebody took him, gave him some sort of elixir to put him to sleep. They cut his hair, marked his face and brought him to a catasta ... a slave auction ... to sell him."

"Why?" Temuchin asked, his voice soft and stricken.

"Because he is the only Elf here," Aigiarn said. "There are many people in the empire who would buy him, make a slave of him, because no one else would have one like him, Temu."

"You bought him," Temuchin said, realizing. "That is what the twenty thousand dorotus were for ... why I saw them within my mind. You bought him."

"Yes," Aigiarn said quietly, knowing this hurt and confused Temuchin. She tucked her fingertips beneath his chin to draw his fallen gaze. "Temu, I am sorry."

"Is that why Toghrul is mad at you?"

Aigiarn shook her head. "No, oyotona," she said. "Toghrul is not mad at me. He is disappointed, that is all. You were right ... twenty thousand dorotus were not enough."

Temuchin blinked at her, puzzled. "But ... but you said..."

"I know what we told you, and we were wrong for it, Temu," she said. "We were able to sell the gyrs for thirty thousand dorotus, but Toghrul wanted to keep some of the money. He wanted to use it to buy food for the tribes. Already, it has been such a hard winter for us, Temu, and ten thousand dorotus would buy enough food to see us all through the winter."

"But you spent it instead?"

She nodded, looking unhappy. "You were right once more. We needed thirty thousand dorotus to buy Rhyden Fabhcun at the catasta. Toghrul is disappointed that I would have put this before the welfare of the people. He does not think it is right."

Tell that to the tribes when Ghaqai ... the twelfth month ... is upon us and our people go hungry, Toghrul had told Aigiarn only moments earlier, and now Temuchin understood why. We will not need the dragons if none of us survive.

"You had given him ten thousand dorotus for food," he whispered. "And you took them back to buy Rhyden Fabhcun."

"Yes," Aigiarn said.

Temuchin lowered his face again. *It is my fault, he thought. Mamma has done all of this because of what I have seen, what I am ... the Negh.*

"He is right," Temuchin said. "You should have used the money for food. We could have found another way..."

"There was no other way, Temu," Aigiarn told him. "That is why your visions showed you thirty thousand dorotus ... Yesugei showed them to you because he knew we would need them. If someone else had bought Rhyden Fabhcun ... if we had not been there tonight, oyotona, to rescue him ... his help would have been lost to us ... the dragons lost to us forever."

"But Toghrul said we will not need the dragons if none of us survive the winter," Temuchin said.

The corner of Aigiarn's mouth lifted. "Our people have survived countless winters, Temu," she told him, tapping the tip of his nose with her finger. "And with far less in stores than we have now. Some extra might have been nice, but we will make do ... and survive ... as always with what we have. Toghrul knows this, and he will be alright. I promise you. He will be fine by the time we are home again in the Nuqut."

"Is that where we are going?" he asked.

Aigiarn nodded. "Yes," she said. "Back to the aysil, where you can show Bergutel the toy boat bugu Yeb bought for him."

Temuchin frowned slightly. "Why are we leaving in such a hurry?" he asked.

Aigiarn sighed, abandoning the pretense of lighthearted distraction. "Because Rhyden Fabhcun's friends might be looking for him, Temu," she said. "Bugu Yeb met one of them on the wharf ... the dark man you described from your dream. He was suspicious of Yeb, and he probably would not let Rhyden Fabhcun come with us, or read the map for us if he knew where he was, why we are bringing him."

Temuchin blinked at her, startled. "Rhyden does not know why he is with us?"

"He has been unconscious much of the time, oyotona, and delirious the rest. I have not been able to explain to him. When his mind is cleared, and he..."

"We cannot just take him, Mamma," Temuchin said. He sat up, staring at her in aghast. "I thought you told him. I thought he understood. You said Yeb had spoken with him ... showed him the wood rubbing, and I thought ... Yeb did not tell him?"

"No, Temu," Aigiarn said, and she sat up as well. "But we will tell him. Let us be on our way, and we will..."

"We cannot just buy him and force him to come with us," Temuchin said, his hands closing into fists.

"We are not forcing him," Aigiarn said.

"But you did not ask him to come ... you did not let him choose," Temuchin said. "You took him, just like the Khahl took Maidar once, and all of the other people stolen from the tribes."

"We did not steal him, Temuchin," Aigiarn said, her brows drawing slightly, her voice stern.

"No, you bought him ... as a slave," Temuchin said. "I would not have told you about the thirty thousand dorotus if I had known you were meant to buy him with them. You told me slavery is a shameful thing ... something terrible ... and that you cannot buy or force someone to serve you willingly or well."

"Temu..." she began, reaching for him. Temuchin shook his head, rising to his feet.

"He will not want to help us now," he said to her. "You can make him come with us, but you cannot make him help us ... or read the map. Why would he want to?"

He was upset and distraught, his eyes glistening with fresh tears. "I ... I would not have told you," he said, and he stepped over her, ducking beneath the canopy. "I would never have if I had known."

* * * *

When he was gone, Aigiarn lay alone in the shadows.

He does not understand, she tried to tell herself. Temuchin is just a child, and the world is still black and white to him ... good and bad, what is and what is not. He cannot fathom of all that lies in between.

Despite this attempt to console herself, Temuchin's words had cut Aigiarn like a blade drawn against her flesh, and she closed her eyes, still feeling their sting against her heart. It had not escaped her reasoning that she had bought the Elf ... she had defied the very core of her personal beliefs, her own disgust of the

flesh industry, and bartered for him. She knew in many ways Toghrul was right; she had taken money that might have helped her people and spent it to buy the Elf.

What other choice did I have? she thought. Spare our people a single winter's hardship ... no different than any other ... or free them from the oppression of the Khahl and the Torachan empire once and for all?

She also knew Temuchin was right, because no matter the excuses she uttered, or how she tried to justify it both aloud and within her heart, she knew she was forcing the Elf to be with them. She had not allowed him to choose; she had treated him as she would have a slave.

What other choice is there? He is the one of the legends. He is the golden falcon. He can read the map, and tell us how to find the dragons' lair. All of my life ... Yesugei's life and those of all of his ancestors before him ... have been spent hoping for this moment, begging it of the Tengri. How could I let the Elf go when he is the only one who can see Temuchin to his destiny? What other choice did I have?

She scooted close to the tapered bow of the knarr, deep in the shadows of the canopy. She curled onto her side, drawing her legs to her chest and blinked against the heat of tears in her eyes. Before coming to Temuchin, she had stood near the opposite end of the boat, watching Yeb tend to the Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun. Yeb had taken some poultices wrapped in leaf packets from his bog'cu, and he had dabbed his fingertips in some lingua'ebesun pulp. He had applied the thick, gel-like mixture gently against the Elf's face, the grim tattoo Mongo Boldry had affixed to his flesh, the mark that was still fresh enough to be sore. Rhyden had stirred at Yeb's touch, trying to turn his face away, lifting his bound hands in feeble protest.

"Athair ... Athair, cuidiann tu me ... le ... le do thoil..." he had moaned, speaking in a lilting, foreign tongue that had drawn Aigiarn's breath still with its melodic beauty. "Athair ... le do thoil ... ta ... ta me eagla..."

He is calling for his father, Temu had said unhappily. Aigiarn had also thought that the word *athair* might mean *father*, an utterance offered in the Elf's language, *Gaeilgen*, as Yeb had called it. The Elf's voice had been weak and tremulous; the piteous plea had ached her heart as much as it obviously had Temuchin's. She had watched Yeb pause in his healing efforts. The shaman had let the Elf clutch at his hand, and he closed his fingers about the Elf's, murmuring gently to him, stroking his other hand against Rhyden's hair.

"What did you say to him?" she had asked softly, kneeling behind Yeb. Whatever quiet words he had offered, they had soothed the distraught Elf, and Rhyden had lapsed into unconsciousness again, the distress draining from his knit brows.

"I told him he did not need to be frightened anymore," Yeb had replied, his voice nearly a whisper as he applied more lingua'ebesun pulp to the side of Rhyden's brow. "That he was safe with me, and that I would let no harm would come to him." He had glanced at her and smiled. "No different than I would tell anyone else confused by sickness or pain, I suppose," he said. "In the end, when we are suffering ... no matter the cause ... do we all not simply wish to hear the same, that it will be alright?"

Aigiarn felt her tears spill and she pressed her lips together, closing her eyes. She had always hated to weep, had struggled fiercely to control herself whenever such helpless urges came upon her. She supposed this made her seem like Khahl women, who were expected not to cry or laugh, but she liked to pretend it simply made her stronger, more resilient.

She heard the canopy rustle behind her as someone stepped beneath it. She did not turn around. She sniffled softly and moved her hand, wiping her tears with her fingertips, her brows drawn.

Someone lay down behind her, too tall and long-legged to be Temuchin. She felt Toghrol's warm breath against the edge of her ear, the comforting weight of his strong forearm draping about her waist. He nestled closely to her, his chest against her back, his hips against hers, and he pressed his lips into her hair.

"I cannot do anything right, can I?" she whispered, closing her eyes again as more tears fell.

"I do not know about that," Toghrol said softly. "You cannot cook, but everything else you seem to do rather well."

She laughed softly despite herself, and felt him squeeze her hand.

"You can outshoot me in a bow hunt," he offered, making her laugh again.

"Stop it, Toghrol."

"You can slaughter a burlagh faster than most men I know."

She glanced over her shoulder. "I said stop it."

"You stitch a fine pair of gloves," he said. "I love Maidar dearly, but she always leaves a gap in the finger stitching ... just enough for the fleece and burlagh fur lining to poke out, and..."

"You are being silly," she said, poking the flat, muscled plane of his belly with her elbow. He held her against him in an embrace, and she draped her hand against his, twining her fingers fondly through his.

"I am sorry, Aigiarn," Toghrol whispered, kissing her hair again. "Temuchin had told us from the first that we would need thirty thousand dorotus, and I was wrong to doubt him ... and wrong to speak harshly to you."

"All of his life, I have told Temu that slavery is wrong," she said. "That what the Khahl and the Torachans do to our people ... what they did to Maidar is an offense against the Tegsh. He was so dismayed to know that I bought the Elf at a catasta, that we did not tell him about the map, the lair."

"And when might we have done this, Aigiarn?" Toghrol asked her quietly. "While the Elf was drugged and reeling on the auction block, or unconscious and moaning in Nekun's arms on the way back to the pier?"

"Temu does not understand that," Aigiarn said.

"No, but you do," Toghrol said. "Do not punish yourself for circumstances beyond your control. If this Elf is truly the falcon Ag'iaron promised, then you were meant to buy him, Aigiarn. There could be no other way than what destiny set out for us. Temuchin himself saw that we would need thirty thousand dorotus."

"But not what they were for," she said. "He told me if he had known, he would not have told me of them." She closed her eyes, stricken. "Oh, he is so angry with me, Toghrol."

"He is wrong, then," Toghrul said, drawing her snugly against him. Aigiarn rolled over to face him and he moved his arm, drawing his hand to her face and brushing his fingertips against her cheek. "As I was."

Aigiarn lifted her chin, her face toward his and he kissed her, his broad, thin mouth settling comfortably ... comforting ... against hers. Her lips parted and she felt the tip of his tongue brush lightly against hers, his hand trailing into her hair, his palm against her ear.

"He does not understand," she said softly. "He does not realize that things are not always so easily defined ... right and wrong ... and that to do one, sometimes you must do the other."

"I will talk to him, explain things," Toghrul said, and he smiled as her brows pinched slightly in indignant offense. "Aigiarn, he is at an age when sometimes what he will not hear from his mother's mouth, he might very well from another's. You know this."

"What if he is right, Toghrul?" she said. "What if the Elf will not help us?"

"The Elf will help us," he said softly, and when she drew breath to speak, he kissed her again to stay her voice. "We have been moved to this place by destiny itself ... all of us, not just Temu. I was wrong not to see it before. Fate would not have brought us here if the Elf would only prove unwilling. He will help us."

"If he translates the map, we will let him go free," she said. "I bought him as a slave, but I cannot ... I will not keep him as one, Toghrul. We will ask him to translate the map ... that is all we need him for. If he translates the map from the language of the baga'han, we can follow it ourselves. We will not need him anymore, and we will give him a boat to return to the empire."

Toghrul nodded in deference, his nose brushing against hers. "Alright then," he said softly.

"That is fair, is it not?" she asked. "It is the best I can think of, the best I can offer him. Temu will understand that, surely, do you not think?"

"I will speak to him," Toghrul told her. "I will explain it, as you have, and yes, Aigiarn, I think he will understand."

He kissed her again, deeply this time, leaning toward her, rolling her onto her back. He leaned over her, and Aigiarn drew her arms about him, feeling her fingertips brush against the long, heavy braid that fell between his shoulders. He slid his hand against her hip, shifting his weight gently, settling himself against her, and when she moved at his touch, his weight, she felt the stirrings of his arousal press against her.

"Ci ayu masi sayiqan," he whispered, his lips brushing hers. *You are so very beautiful.* "Let me come to you later ... please..."

"Yes," she said softly, caressing his face, his etched cheeks and strong jaw with her hands. He smiled and kissed her again.

"Bi chamd khairtai, Aigiarn," Toghrul told her. *I love you.*

She did not offer him reply; she never could, not when he said that, but Aigiarn lifted her head from the furs and kissed him deeply, cupping her hands against his face. It is the best she could think of, the best she could offer him, and he understood.

* * * *

"Here is your ongon, bugu Yeb," Temuchin said, standing behind the shaman at the stern of the knarr. He lowered his head and slipped the thin cord of sinew from about his neck, offering the ongon to Yeb. They had just rowed past a enormous tall ship from which the sounds of music and laughter had originated. Temuchin had looked up, gazing in wonder at the towering hull of the anchored ship as they passed it. He had been able to see the cheery glow of lanterns hung across the deck, and people moving about above him, their footsteps echoing in dance, their voices raised in merry songs. He had seen the name of the ship painted in large letters, an poetic-sounding word ...*a'Maorga* ... he had never heard before.

Yeb turned to him and smiled. "Thank you, Temu," he said, reaching out and closing his fingers against the small hide pouch.

"I tried to do as you asked me," Temuchin said, feeling embarrassed and ashamed as he blinked down at the toes of his guta. "I ... I do not think it worked very well, though."

"It was enough that you held it, Temuchin," Yeb told him.

Temuchin looked at the Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun. He seemed to be sleeping, curled on his side beneath a pile of blankets and furs. He was trembling despite the covers, and Temuchin knelt beside him. "He is cold," he said softly.

"It is hard sometimes for people of the south to grow easily acclimated to our colder winters here," Yeb said. "I will find some more blankets. That should keep the chill from him."

Temuchin reached out and brushed his fingertips against the Elf's face. He glanced at Yeb, suddenly worried that the shaman might scold or shoo him, but Yeb merely smiled at him again. Temuchin smiled back and then returned his gaze to Rhyden, touching his hair.

He had never been so near to someone of non-Ulusian heritage before; it was only the third or fourth time in his life he had ever seen someone with blond hair ... and the first he had ever been close enough to actually lay his fingers against it. Temuchin stroked Rhyden's hair, marveling at the different texture, softer than his own, thick and heavy.

He gazed in quiet wonder at the tapered edge of Rhyden's ear; it was larger in proportion to his head than any Oirat's, and longer, resting nearly flush against his scalp. His features were different than an Oirat's, too, more like a Torachan's, with deliberate, sharp angles; long, narrow lines and definitive structure. The tip of his nose seemed small and delicate; his eyes large and round, even when closed. His complexion was fair, like cream, almost.

"Look how pale he is, Yeb," Temuchin said softly. Rhyden moved at Temuchin's touch, his voice, turning his cheek against the furs beneath his face, murmuring softly, unintelligibly. Temuchin shied, drawing his hand away, risking another glance at Yeb to be certain he was not in trouble.

"It is alright," Yeb said. "Whatever the slave masters gave him wanes in his mind, that is all. He is an Elf, Temu. From the west, across the sea."

Temuchin nodded. "Mamma told me."

"The ancient baga'han had a legend of a place called Alfheim across the western sea," Yeb said. "It was a variation on lore they had borrowed from the Enghan to their north. The Enghan sailed the ocean currents even in those long-ago eras, and they spoke of a place they had visited once ... a realm of

magnificent beauty: Alfheim, the land of the Elves."

Temuchin blinked at Yeb, surprised.

"When the Abhacan left the Khar mountains, they must have thought of these old tales, and tried to sail across the sea to reach Alfheim," Yeb said. He gazed down at Rhyden and smiled gently. "Some of them succeeded, it would seem."

"Mamma said the baga'han still lived there," Temuchin said. "She said it was called Tir ... Tira..."

"Tiralainn," Yeb said. "Yes."

"And he knows them," Temuchin whispered, looking at Rhyden. "He can speak their language, she said, read the map." Temuchin looked at Yeb, his brows lifted. "Will he be alright, Yeb?"

"Yes, Temu," Yeb said, stroking his hand against Temuchin's hair. "Do not worry for that. He is young yet, his body strong ... as is his spirit." He smiled. "He is very special, Temu. He is like us ... you and me."

"He has visions?" Temuchin asked, remembering how in his dream, Rhyden had looked directly at him, as though he could see Temuchin, while his friend, it had seemed, had seen nothing. "He can see spirits?"

"That, and much more, I think," Yeb said. "I sense within him what we call *hiimori*. It is what grants shamans our power of mind and spirit. The stronger the *hiimori*, the greater the shaman. It is a gift passed by the Tengri to very few beyond our sacred order ... such as yourself, Temu, and it would seem, Rhyden Fabhcun."

"How do you know he has *hiimori*, Yeb?" Temuchin asked, as he looked down at Rhyden.

"Because I met his *utha suld* in the city," Yeb said, startling Temuchin. "It was Rhyden Fabhcun's *utha suld* that led me to the catastas, showed me where to find him. I would never have felt its presence within my mind had I Ogotai's *ongon* to keep me shielded from it. So you see, Temu, you indeed served great and necessary purpose in remaining behind on the *knarr*, and holding Ogotai for me. We would never have found him otherwise."

Yeb had draped his *ongon* about his neck, and toyed now with the small hide pouch dangling against his breast. "He is very special, Temu," he said again, nodding at Rhyden. "He is watched over by an *endur* ... the most powerful of all *utha sults*. Never in my days have I sensed something of such strength and urgency. It guards him fiercely." He looked at Temuchin, placing his hand against the boy's shoulder. "It wanted us to find him at the *catasta*. It wanted him to be here, with us. It would seem this night has been as much a part of this young Elf's destiny as it has been yours, Temu ... and that you are angered with your mother for no cause in the end."

Temuchin blinked at Yeb, startled. "How ... but I ... how did you...?"

"It is a large boat," Yeb said. "But not nearly so that I could not hear you. Aigiarn did what she thought was best, Temuchin. For you ... for us all. The circumstances were unfortunate, and none of us are grateful for them, but for whatever reason, they were meant to happen as they did. Yesugei knew that; Ogotai, as well. This *endur* I sensed ... Rhyden Fabhcun's *utha suld* ... knew it, too, and they have all brought us together with great purpose in mind."

"Temu, come away from there," Toghrul said from behind them, startling Temuchin anew. "We do not know what the Elf is capable of, and he might be dangerous when he wakes."

"Dangerous?" Temuchin shook his head at Toghrul, bewildered. "No, Toghrul, he would not hurt us."

"Come on, ko'un," Toghrul said.

Temuchin glanced at Yeb and sighed, rising to his feet. "He would not hurt me," he said, hunching his shoulders unhappily as Toghrul guided him toward the aisle between the oarsmen, directing him toward the stem of the knarr.

"You do not know that, Temu," Toghrul said. "And I would as soon you keep your distance from him until we know for certain. It is late, besides. Well past time for you to be sleeping."

Temuchin trudged toward the canopy over his pallet, dragging his gutal along in reluctant concession. "Teyimu, Toghrul," he said. *Yes, Toghrul.* He glanced over his shoulder at Yeb. "Oroin mend, Yeb."
Good night.

Yeb lowered his head and smiled for the boy. "Good night, Temu," he said.

Toghrul watched Temuchin cross the length of the knarr, ducking beneath the flap of canopy drawn across the stern and disappearing in the shadows beneath. "Thank you for that," he said at length to the shaman.

"For what?" Yeb asked.

"For speaking with Temu about Aigiarn. I did not mean to overhear, but I had planned to talk with him about it myself. I know Aigiarn will appreciate it."

Yeb nodded. "He is upset by all that has happened, that is all. Getting angry at Aigiarn is a way he feels safe in expressing his frustration, his confusion. I did not mind to remind him this is not always fair to Aigiarn. She tries very hard to do what is right, especially when the matter comes to Temuchin." He looked at the stern of the knarr, and the canopy under which Temuchin had disappeared, where Aigiarn yet remained. "She is an extraordinary woman."

"Yes, she is," Toghrul said, drawing Yeb's gaze. "You should keep away from the Elf, as well, bugu Yeb, until we know he is safe."

"The Elf is confused, Toghrul, and frightened," Yeb said. "I think that a kind voice, a hand proffering comfort to him would help ease any alarm he might feel upon stirring ... as well as any danger he might pose to us."

Toghrul looked at Yeb for a long moment. "Please, Yeb. Leave him alone. Your interest in him only convinces Temu it is safe to draw near to him."

"I see no reason Temu should not feel safe in drawing near to him," Yeb replied.

"If he rouses in the night, one of the Kelet will wake you," Toghrul said. "You left his hands bound, did you not?"

"I did as you asked me to, yes," Yeb said with a nod. "Though I would remind that waking to find

oneself bound and isolated among a party of strangers does little to ingratiate said unfamiliar company to the one who is trussed. If you would plan to be friends of a sort with him, you might begin by demonstrating it."

Toghrul smirked slightly. "Then I am quite safe, bugu Yeb," he said. "As I have no intention of being friends with the Elf ... of any sort."

Yeb lowered his face politely. "As you wish," he said, rising to his feet. He walked slowly past Toghrul, keeping his fingers curled against the small sack of his ongon. "Oroin mend, Toghrul." *Good night.*

"And to you as well, bugu Yeb," Toghrul replied.

* * * *

Several hours passed. The knarr had left Lunan Bay and moved out upon the open sea. The Uru'ut crewmen had unfurled the broad, solitary sail as they followed the winds north along the coast of Torach toward the Garyelloch Isles. Activity on the boat had stilled. Several Uru'ut remained awake to tend to the rudder and sail, but the other Oirat had long since found places for themselves along the benches and floor to curl beneath blankets and furs to sleep.

Temuchin lay on his side, facing the stern. Aigiarn had fallen asleep behind him, with Toghrul resting beside her, the sounds of their deep, measured breaths overlapping in peaceful harmony. Temuchin had closed his eyes earlier and pretended to sleep, but his mind was still restless and troubled, and he had found no respite from it in slumber.

He had listened to the soft sounds of Toghrul and his mother behind them for awhile; the rustling of blankets, Aigiarn's breath fluttering quietly, Toghrul's voice, murmuring softly to her. Their movements had been masked by the undulation of water beneath the boat, but Temuchin had known what they were doing. It did not bother or embarrass him; Toghrul came often to their ger at the aysil, and he and Aigiarn would often make such quiet sounds together.

He had asked them about it once. Toghrul had gawked at him, wide-eyed and somewhat mortified by Temuchin's curious notice, but Aigiarn had drawn him aside and tried her best to explain. It was how babies came to be, she had said, although sometimes people simply laid together because it was tender, and it drew their hearts closer.

Whatever its purpose, the act made them both feel better somehow, but especially his mother. Temuchin knew Aigiarn was desperately lonely, a sort that he as a child could not assuage. It seemed a loneliness that even those moments with Toghrul could not stave, but Toghrul helped at least, and Temuchin knew that he loved Aigiarn.

Toghrul had asked Aigiarn to marry him; Temuchin knew this, as well, just as he knew for as many times as Toghrul would ask, Aigiarn would always say no. He did not understand why. Toghrul had always been like a father to Temuchin, and they had always been treated among the Kerait tribe as part of Toghrul's clan. Aigiarn loved Toghrul for this, if nothing else, and yet, she always refused him.

"She is still in love with your father," Yeb had told him once. Yeb had looked sorrowful as he spoke, as though this admittance had brought a very heavy burden upon his heart. "Something within her still clings to Yesugei. She has never stopped mourning for him. She has never let him go in her heart ... and I do not think she ever will, Temu."

Aigiarn and Toghrul were sleeping now, as was Yeb. Temuchin could see him laying across one of the

benches with his back to Temuchin, his long braid draped over the edge of his makeshift bed, falling to the floor of the knarr. There was a solitary lamp lit, a gourd-shaped piece of pottery with burlagh fat and a long wick within, and holes cut into the sides to let light emit. It dangled from a hook on the mast, its soft light spilling in haphazard swaths across the deck. In its dim glow, Temuchin could also make out the silhouetted form of Rhyden Fabchun laying on the floor of the stem, still shivering with cold. He could hear him sometimes, frightened, lonely sounds; soft mewls and faint moans that nearly broke Temuchin's heart.

Temuchin drew himself onto his knees, moving slowly so that he would not rouse Aigiarn or Toghrul. He gathered together the blankets and furs he had burrowed beneath, holding them against his chest. He crept out from beneath the canopy, tiptoeing softly across the deck, stepping cautiously over benches and around sleeping Oirat.

The Uru'ut at the rudder looked at him wordlessly, his expression curious as Temuchin approached. The man was smoking a small pipe carved from stone and a fragrant cloud of smoke drifted about his head, luminescent in starlight.

"He has stirred now and then," the man said to Temuchin, with a glance at Rhyden. "I have kept my eye on him, but he does not seem hurt to me, not enough to rouse bugu Yeb, I think."

"No, he is still cold, that is all," Temuchin said. "Let Yeb sleep. I have brought him some more furs."

The Oirat man smiled at Temuchin as he puffed on his pipe. "That is kind of you, Temu. I will not tell Toghrul, or your mother."

He dropped Temuchin a little wink and Temuchin smiled at him. "Thank you," he said, ducking beneath the canopy.

Temuchin knew he would be in trouble if Toghrul or Aigiarn found him there, but he could not help himself. Rhyden trembled beneath his blankets; he whimpered softly as Temuchin knelt and drew a heavy fur about his shoulders. He had worked his hands from beneath the blankets, drawing them to his face in his sleep. His wrists were still lashed together, and Temuchin felt sorry for him. Toghrul said that the bindings were necessary, that Rhyden might prove dangerous, but Temuchin could not believe that.

Rhyden's fingers were elongated and gracefully tapered, longer than any Oirat man's. Temuchin reached out curiously, tentatively, brushing his fingertips against the Elf's, smiling softly as Rhyden moved his hands, letting Temuchin's small fingers slide between his own. Rhyden's fingers draped gently down against his knuckles, holding him lightly as though he found comfort in Temuchin's touch.

Rhyden whimpered again, and he opened his eyes, blinking dazedly up at Temuchin. The boy froze, his breath drawing still as the Elf's bleary, confused gaze settled upon him. His fingers closed all the more gently against Temuchin's hand, offering a slight squeeze.

"Bidein...?" he breathed, a word Temuchin did not understand.

"It is alright," Temuchin said softly to him. "Do not be frightened, Rhyden."

"Cold..." Rhyden whispered in the Torachan common tongue, trembling. "Please ... I ... I am so ... so cold."

"I know," Temuchin said. "I know, and I am sorry." He lay down on the pallet of blankets, curling onto

his side facing the Elf. He drew the blankets he had brought over his shoulder, letting them drape over Rhyden's body as well. Oirat families often slept together in communal huddles to share each other's warmth during the winter months, and he snuggled close to Rhyden, holding his hand. "I am here," he whispered. "It is alright."

"Please..." Rhyden said, his eyelids drooping again. "Please, do not go, bidein ... do not ... leave me..."

"I will not," Temuchin said. "I will not, Rhyden. I promise."

Rhyden nodded, closing his eyes, his breath escaping his mouth in a soft, shuddering sigh. "Please..." he breathed, his fingers slackening against Temuchin's hand, slipping loose.

Temuchin brushed his hand against Rhyden's hair, pained as he stared at the slave auction tattoo marked indelibly on Rhyden's face. "I am here," he said softly as Rhyden slept once more. "I will not leave you. I promise."

The adventure continues...

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