

BOOK OF DRAGONS

BOOK THREE IN THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN

VOLUME THREE OF FIVE



SARA REINKE

Book of Dragons – Volume 3

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Chapter One

Temu awoke to the soft sound of Yeb's voice, murmuring incantations and the whisper of his boot soles in the snow and fallen pine needles as he walked slowly around the perimeter of the campsite. "Ene mor ayu manu jaga," Yeb said softly. "Ta yadaqu getulku dotura ene yajar." *This line shall be our border. You cannot pass into this place.*

Temu sat up, drawing away from the warmth of Toghrul's body. Toghrul shrugged his shoulder, settling himself comfortably beneath his blankets without stirring. Temu rubbed his eyes sleepily and looked out from beneath the lean-to's canopy. He could see Yeb, more silhouette than solid form, moving on the far side of the clearing, just beyond the circumference of the fire's glow. The shaman held a dalbuur—a small ritual fan made of thin hide stretched taut across a frame of wood—in one hand, flapping it over the ground as he passed. In the other, he held a small pouch upturned, letting something that looked like sand or ash sprinkle down onto the snow.

"Ugei rid ayu boke adali manu buyu," Yeb said. "Ba minu kucun ayu masi tomu. Bi ibegel bide." *No sorcery is stronger than mine, and my power is vast. I shall protect us.*

His quiet words did not disturb anyone else among the sleeping Oirat. Jelmei and Nakhu, the two Kelet guards assigned to the watch sat near the fire, watching Yeb with interest. A light, but persistent snow had started to fall, filtering down through the pine boughs overhead.

“Ugei lus, ugei kelberi getulku bi,” Yeb said, waving his fan skyward and then down at the ground again. *No spirit, no form shall pass me.* “Bi managa degere bide. Bi ibegel bide.” *I am guard over us. I shall protect us.*

Temu crawled out from beneath his blankets and furs and stood, keeping one burlagh hide wrapped about his shoulders against the chill. He ducked his head and stepped carefully among the dozing forms of his friends. He moved into the circumference of firelight, drawing Nakhu and Jelmei’s gazes. Yeb did not seem to notice Temu’s approach at all, and continued walking slowly, sprinkling the contents of his little pouch, flapping his fan and chanting.

“What is he doing?” Temu whispered to Jelmei, wide-eyed with wonder.

“Buyu,” Jelmei whispered back. *Magic.*

Temu sat next to the two guards as they watched Yeb in fascination. He noticed Rhyden asleep across from them by the fire, curled beneath heavy layers of furs. Aigiarn slept near him, resting on her side facing the warmth of the blaze. She was close enough that the cap of her head nearly met Rhyden’s, and her hand lay draped against his.

He is lonely...alone... Aigiarn had told Toghrol of Rhyden. As though he is haunted by things he cannot bear to recall, but does not dare to forget. I can see it in his eyes sometimes...when he thinks no one is looking...

Temu had always been able to see Aigiarn’s own loneliness and sorrow in her eyes. Yeb was right; a part of her still mourned for his father. She was isolated by her grief, imprisoned by it.

The way he looks at Temu...it is as though Temu draws him out, chases that burden from his heart...when he smiles at Temu, that sorrow lifts from him and he is beautiful for it.

Temu smiled softly. Aigiarn could have just as easily been describing herself with those words, and the effect Rhyden had on her lately. A couple of days earlier, while they had brought the knarr briefly ashore, Rhyden had coaxed Aigiarn into playing a round of pingachu with him and Temu. When she had accepted, Temu had been astounded; he had never seen his mother play anything before. She was not the sort for games or goofing, and he had been further astonished when Aigiarn turned out to be very good at pingachu—she had beaten them both, as a matter of fact. She had laughed with them, a deep, visceral, joyous laugh Temu had not heard from her in a long, long time. She had opened her mouth in a wide, happy smile and laughed aloud with abandon, and Temu had been nearly dumbstruck with wonder.

“What do you think it means?” he had whispered to Yeb once they had been underway once more that morning. He had kept his voice low, lest Togrul overhear. Togrul had not missed the playful exchanges between Aigiarn and Rhyden, and to judge by his scowl, he had not approved.

“I think it means perhaps other destinies were meant to be served by Rhyden’s company than just Ag’iamon’s promise,” Yeb had replied quietly. He had glanced at Temu, raising his brow. “Does it trouble you, Temu?”

Temu had blinked at him, surprised. “No, Yeb,” he said, shaking his head. “Not at all. It is just different about her, that is all. I like it—I like that she is happy.”

Yeb had tousled Temu's hair with his fingertips, smiling. "For every winter, no matter how long it may seem in the duration, Temu, there is always a spring."

Temu thought he understood what Yeb had meant, although he was not certain. Aigiarn had found within Rhyden a like mind and heart. Both of them had withdrawn in their own ways following the deaths of those beloved to them—and both harbored feelings of shame and responsibility for those deaths. Aigiarn never spoke of such things to Temu, but he had sensed them about her, just as he could about Rhyden, without Rhyden saying a word.

Toghrul had always understood Aigiarn's pain, because he, too, had known his share of loss and grief, but he had never shared in it. Toghrul railed against his sorrow in actions and anger; Aigiarn had retreated from it. She had harbored it very much in private and secrecy, just like Rhyden had with his own. The two shared this common bond, and when they were together, somehow it lessened upon their hearts for awhile.

For every winter, no matter how long it may seem in the duration, Temu, there is always a spring, Yeb had said, and Temu smiled again, gazing at the Elf and his mother, at the simple but somehow poignant image of their hands folded together, aglow in the firelight.

"It is late. You should be asleep," Yeb said, startling him from his thoughts. He had not even heard Yeb approach and he blinked at the shaman as he sat on the ground, folding his legs beneath him.

"I heard you chanting," Temu said. He watched as Yeb folded his dalbuur and tucked it within the bogcu pouch at his sash. He produced two small, relatively flat items

in place of the fan, each wrapped carefully, deliberately in squares of wool. “What were you doing, Yeb? What was that you spilled on the ground?”

“It is a ritual called toyuriqu,” Yeb replied. He set the two bundles on the ground before his lap and set about unwrapping one. It was a toli, a small, circular amulet made of silver. The medallion was smooth and featureless, polished like a mirror. It was fastened to a loop of sinew, which Yeb drew over his head, draping about his neck.

“I spilled salt upon the ground,” Yeb said, glancing at Temu. “I drew a ring around our campsite. It is a jaqa, as a spiritual barrier, to keep our uthas within—yours, mine and Rhyden’s—and keep any spirits or spells the Khahl send to spy on us from drawing near.”

“Will it work?” Temu asked, watching as Yeb unfolded the second bundle. This one contained seven dark, shriveled, dried berries tucked inside. Yeb pinched two of the berries between his fingertips and popped them in his mouth. He chewed slowly, but did not swallow.

“I do not know,” he said. “Kagan Targutai’s yeke idugan has powerful hiimori. I am stronger than she is, but she conjures many spells and incantations in tandem with her shaman council. Rhyden’s endur spirit, his utha, Trejaeran handled them when they tried to spy on us before, but I would do my part, whatever I can, to keep them from us should they feel bold enough to try again.”

“What are these?” Temu asked, leaning over to peer at the berries.

“Qola’nidu,” Yeb replied. “They are summer fruit of the woodlands. They serve many purposes to shamans, including as part of the qaraqqu ritual—which I am about to practice.”

Temu knew of the qola'nidu plant. It was a type of forest scrub, with thin leaves that flowered in late summer with scattered bell-shaped blossoms. The qola'nidu's hard green fruit that yielded to darker hues of scarlet and purple toward the autumn was unfit for eating, because they were poisonous.

Yeb saw the look of startled, horrified realization cross Temu's face, and he chuckled. "It is alright, Temu," he said. "They lose some of their potency when dried in the sun. They help me see things."

"What sort of things?"

"Spirits," Yeb said. "They open my mind, my visai—my senses—to the presence of spirits. They enhance my hiimori, focus it, bolster it. I do not plan to sleep tonight. I will allow my mind to awaken fully and will practice qaraqqu."

"Qaraqqu?" Temu said.

"My ami suld will leave my form," Yeb said. "It is a dangerous ritual, and not without its risks. Anytime a shaman releases his or her ami, they must depend upon their utha sulds, and our rituals of buyu to keep our amis from thinking we have died, that it is time for them to return to the spirit tree."

"Yeb...!" Temu breathed, wide-eyed.

Yeb smiled. "Do not be frightened, Temu. I have done this many, many times. Ogotai will be with me. His strength, and the power of the jaqa perimeter I have cast around the fire in salt will contain my ami here in this place. I will keep vigil over us against the Khahl shamans' trickery."

"Can you stop them if they come, Yeb?" Temu whispered anxiously.

“I can keep them from us,” Yeb said. “The jaqa and the incantations of toyuriqu will keep them away, but should any spirits draw too close, I will drive them back with this.” He took the toli between his fingers, showing it to Temu. “This toli mirror is spiritual armor of sorts. It repels attack by sulds, deflects dark buyu back toward the conjurer. This one is most powerful indeed. It belonged to my father. It has served me very well for many long years.”

Temu was quiet for a long moment, looking down at the dried berries. “If I took one,” he said quietly. “Would I see spirits, too, Yeb? Would I...” He glanced at the shaman. “Would I be able to see my father?”

“I do not know, Temu,” Yeb said gently.

“Could I try?” Temu asked. “I...I could help you with toyuriqu.”

“Not tonight, Temu,” Yeb said. “Go back to your pallet and rest now. Let me tend to this.”

“Even if I go back to the pallet, I will not sleep,” Temu said. “I am not tired at all. Please, Yeb. I am awake. I could help you.”

“No, Temu. Not tonight.”

Temu blinked at him, crestfallen. “You...but you said I have strong hiimori, too...”

“I did, yes, and you do,” Yeb said, nodding once. “But you are inexperienced with your gifts, Temuchin, and qaraqqu is no idle undertaking for young shamans. Tonight is not the time for introductions or lessons to its methods.”

“Please, Yeb,” Temu pleaded. “You said the jaqa and toli would keep you safe, and that Ogotai would be with you. Would not my father be with me to protect me? You have always trusted me—trusted my hiimori. Please, will you not now?”

Yeb smiled at him kindly. He reached out and brushed the cuff of his knuckles against Temu's cheek. "Yesugei is always with you, protecting you, Temu," he said. "You were so certain of it earlier, when you stood against Toghrul. Why has your faith waned so soon, in so few hours?"

Temu blinked down at the ground, shrugging away from Yeb's hand. "I...I just want to see him," he whispered. "Just once, Yeb, I want to see him."

"I know, Temu."

"He would come for me just this once, I know he would." Temu stared at the shaman, imploring. "Please, Yeb."

Yeb was quiet for a long, pensive moment. He regarded Temu wordlessly, his eyes kind but unwavering. At last he reached down, lifting one of the berries from the scrap of wool. He pressed it against Temu's palm, holding the boy's gaze. "You will listen to me," he said, and Temu nodded, his mouth unfurling in a bright smile. Yeb cupped his hand against Temu's cheek, his grave expression making Temu's enthusiasm falter. "You will listen to me," he said again. "You will stay near to me. When I tell you to, you will hold my hand and you will not turn loose of me. You will not leave my side."

"Yes, Yeb," Temu said, nodding again.

Yeb reached into his bogcu and pulled out another small package. It was another doli, this one smaller than his own. "Here," he said softly, draping the loop of sinew around Temu's neck, drawing the amulet down to hang against Temu's heart, above the swell of his father's ongon outlined beneath his clothes. Temu stared down at the small mirror, wide-eyed.

“This was my first toli,” Yeb told him, drawing his gaze. “Bugu Inalchuk, my father gave this to me when I was just a boy and I embarked with him upon my first qaraq. It, too, has served me very well over the years...as it will you.”

“I can keep it?”

Yeb smiled. “Yes, Temu.”

Temu smiled again. He leaned forward and embraced the shaman, wrapping his arms around Yeb’s neck. “Thank you, Yeb.”

Yeb canted his head and pressed his lips against Temu’s brow. “You are welcome,” he said softly, stroking his hand against the top of Temu’s cap. When Temu sat back from him, his expression grew solemn again. “Bite into the qola’nidu, but do not swallow it,” Yeb instructed. “Tuck it between your back teeth and hold it there. Chew only a little. Let the waters of your mouth soften the fruit and call forth its buyu.”

Temu nodded. He opened his mouth and slipped the berry between his lips. He settled his back teeth against the withered scrap of fruit and caught a hint of pleasant flavor, similar to ripened blackberries.

“Do not swallow it,” Yeb said again. He cupped his hand demonstratively beneath his chin and spat out his own berries. He tossed them into the fire. “When the buyu is within you, then you may spit it out.”

“How will I know the buyu is within me?” Temu asked.

Yeb smiled at him. “You will know,” he promised. “You must be patient. Watch the fire, Temu.”

Temu nodded his head, letting his gaze settle on the fire. He watched the flames lick against the scraps of wood and bark; Jelmei and Nakhu had added more kindling to

the blaze, stoking it. He could hear the soft scrabbling of fire against dead pine. He could smell the bitter, heady incense of sap infused within the smoke. He watched as embers darted from the tips of the flames, scampering skyward, and he followed them with his eyes. The glowing embers danced with snowflakes on a soft current of air.

He could feel the qola'nidu berry softening in his mouth. He could taste it against his tongue. The warmth of the fire lulled him, and he felt his shoulders settle comfortably, his eyelids drooping. He relaxed, his breath slowing beneath his chest, marking a deep, steady rhythm. Temu watched the fire, and it seemed that after a few moments, he grew very light, as though his form became unfettered from the earth and floated in the air, a wayward, downy seedling caught in a faint and distant breeze.

The light of the fire seemed to dim, like shadows draped gently down from the surrounding tree boughs, snuffing its glow. Temu became aware of another light from this direction, however, and he blinked dazedly at the blaze, his breath stilling momentarily as he said softly, wondrously, "Oh..."

Rhyden was glowing. His entire body was surrounded by bright, golden light. The illumination radiated out from his chest, enfolding his form. There was no such light around Aigiarn, or any of the Oirat sleeping beneath the lean-tos, and puzzled, Temu turned to Yeb.

The shaman watched him with a soft smile. Like Rhyden, he was aglow; Yeb's light was scarlet, like the edge of the horizon during a brilliant autumn sunset. When Yeb breathed, vermillion light, like a mist, drifted gracefully from his mouth, his nose.

"Yeb...!" Temu whispered breathlessly. He glanced down at himself and realized he, too, was glowing. His own light was blue; there was a bright corona of it ablaze over

his heart, and it branched from here, spreading all over him, enclosing him in an illuminated sheath of delicate blue. “What...what is this? Is it buyu?”

“It is your gerel,” Yeb told him gently. “The light of hiimori within one’s heart, their soul. The gola’nidu has opened your mind to it. You can sense it now, see it in yourself and others.”

“Bugger me,” Temu gasped, incredulous. He blinked at Yeb, realizing what he had said and feeling abashed until he saw Yeb shake his head, chuckling softly.

“The gerel of a shaman is red,” Yeb said. “That is how we know who will become one of us. Yours is blue, Temu—you alone in all of history bear the blue gerel fire. You are the Negh. This light is as much a part of your destiny as the mark of the seven sacred stars of Dologhon.”

“Why is Rhyden’s golden?” Temu asked, turning to look again in wonder at the Elf asleep by the fire, the glow of his own form, his hiimori brighter than the blaze.

“Because he is the golden falcon, Temu,” Yeb said. “That is how I have known from the first that he was meant to be with us—that he was the one Ag’iamon promised. I could sense the strength of his gerel, even when I could not see it. Like yours, it thrums within the air like music. Do you hear it? Can you hear him?”

Temu blinked, his eyes widening in new awe. He realized he could hear a low and trembling vibration, like the resonant echoes of heavy, overlapping drumbeats. “I can hear it, Yeb,” he said. “That is Rhyden?”

“It is the sound of his soul, and ours, Temu, our powers together here in harmony.”

“Tere ayu sayiqan,” Temu breathed. *It is beautiful.*

He rose to his feet and walked away from Yeb, approaching the fire. He lifted his face toward the sky, looking up at the snow. Time itself had seemed to slow; the delicate flakes hovered, suspended in the margin of air between clouds and earth. His own footsteps felt weightless and effortless, and he could not feel the press of the ground against the soles of his gutal.

When he looked again at the fire, he realized the flames crept against the wood now, spindly fingertips splayed and outstretched, poised and groping along each log and branch. The smoke dangled in the air, a motionless, translucent haze twining up toward pine boughs. He turned to Jelmei and Nakhu and found the two Kelet unmoving as they sat nearby, their faces turned together. Nakhu looked down between his boot toes while Jelmei leaned toward him, his chin lifted, his lips parted as though he spoke quiet words against his friend's ear. Neither of them blinked nor breathed.

"Take my hand now, Temu," Yeb said.

"Why?" Temu asked, turning to the shaman. As he did, he gasped sharply, his eyes flying wide in frightened realization. He was floating, the soles of his gutal poised at least a foot off of the ground. "Yeb—!" he cried, breathless with alarm, pedaling his feet in the empty air.

"Your ami has left your body," Yeb said, smiling as he reached up, taking Temu by the hand. "Do not be frightened. The buyu is within you."

Temu smiled in wonder as he closed his fingers against Yeb's palm. "I am doing it," he said quietly. He beamed at Yeb. "I am doing it, Yeb—just like you! I am doing it!"

"Yes, you are," Yeb said with a nod, the corner of his mouth lifted gently. He pulled gently against Temu's arm, drawing him to the ground. Temu felt his boots settle

against the snow, as weightless and effortless as a feather in a draft. He could see himself, his own form behind him, sitting against the ground with the burlagh fur swathed about his shoulders. Yeb still sat beside of him, and they both gazed at the fire, their eyes heavily lidded and drowsy, and Temu gasped again in new astonishment.

“Yeb...” he whispered, incredulous, staring between the Yeb beside the fire and the Yeb who stood beside him, holding his hand. “Yeb, how...how did we...?”

“This is the jabsar,” Yeb told him. “The spiritual between, the boundary between our mortal plane, the eternal light of the spirit world and the unknown darkness of qarang’qui. There is no time here, not in any measure we could hope to understand, and our physical forms have no meaning in this place.”

“But I can see you...” Temu said. He looked down at their clasped hands. “I...I can feel you, Yeb, your fingers against mine. I can...”

“You see my form, and yours, Temu, because that is what your mind expects to find,” Yeb said. “Our amis have no shape of their own. They can take our appearance, or assume the likeness of birds as they soar toward the spirit tree. Your ami encompasses your mind, Temu, and yours is unaccustomed to leaving your body behind. It tries to show you things, present this plane of existence to you in ways you can understand, forms that are familiar to you.”

“I am not real, then?” Temu asked, glancing down at himself. He patted his free palm against his chest, his eyes round and amazed. It seemed real enough to him; he could feel his hand thumping against his heavy clothes, his ribcage. “You are not real, Yeb?”

“Oh, we are both very real,” Yeb told him, smiling again. “We are different here, that is all. Your spirit can float here, Temu—as you have seen. It can pass through walls, locked doors, the pine boughs above us like sunlight or wind. It can be as solid as stone, as diffused as smoke. You can cross great distances without blinking your eyes. You can fly above the trees, the ocean and the Bith—”

“We can fly?” Temu gasped.

“Yes,” Yeb said, and he chuckled. “But you must very careful, Temu. There are good reasons shamans do not linger within the jabsar.” He tapped his fingertip in the air, pointing to their bodies seated before the campfire. “It is not good to leave our forms unattended for too long.”

“Why not?”

“Because our life-forces...the whole structure of the Bith, Temu, is based on the balance of the Tegsh,” Yeb said. “Within our forms, this means a balance between our amis—our minds—and our suni sulds—our bodies. Leaving our sunis alone within our bodies puts them at great risk, for there are many restless, formless spirits within nature who would try and take our forms from us, to slip inside with us unaware.”

Temu’s eyes widened at this, and he looked nervously at his body.

“There are other risks besides,” Yeb said. “Here in the jabsar, our amis do not feel pain. However, our bodies can still be hurt, and because of the Tegsh, pain and injury are shared with us. If the suni is injured, it is felt within the ami. So we must be careful, and never stray too far from our forms, and never allow our amis to keep too long from our bodies.”

“Can we see other spirits here, Yeb?” Temu asked. “If they to sneak inside of our bodies, would we see them?”

“We would, yes.” Yeb offered Temu’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “But we do not need to fear for that tonight. The jaqa will keep any restless spirits in these woods from reaching our forms. They cannot cross the line of salt I have drawn about our camp.”

“But then, where is Ogotai? Where is my father?” Temu asked, looking around in confusion. “You told me the jaqa would keep them inside of the boundary with us. Why can we not see them?”

Yeb looked about himself, his brow arched as he realized the absence of his utha suld for the first time. “I do not know, Temu.”

“I thought we would be able to see them,” Temu said, crestfallen and dismayed.

“Yesugei has been an enigmatic utha to you,” Yeb said. “I did not know if he would allow us to see him or not. But Ogotai should be with us...” He frowned, turning his head this way and that, looking around the campsite. “He has been most agitated and anxious today. He is the one who bid me to perform the rituals of toyuriqu and qaraq, to cast the jaqa and hold counsel with him here in the jabsar. He wanted me to come—it seemed very urgent to him.”

“Is it the Khahl?” Temu asked. “You said Ogotai was upset tonight about the visions of the crows. Does he know more, Yeb? Does he know what happened to the Uru’ut aysil?”

“I do not know,” Yeb murmured. He looked troubled all at once, his brows drawing together, pinching along the bridge of his nose.

“Where is he, Yeb?” Temu whispered. “Has something happened to Ogotai?”

“I do not know,” Yeb said again. He glanced at Temu and realized the boy’s mounting fear. He tightened his fingers slightly against Temu’s own and smiled. “I am certain it is nothing. Ogotai has been known to wander. Perhaps he ventured beyond the jaqa as I marked it against the ground and is trapped beyond the border now, out among the trees. Let me draw your ami to your form again, and I will go and look for him.”

“Oh, Yeb, no,” Temu pleaded, clutching Yeb’s hand between his own in implore. “Let me stay here with you. I can help, Yeb, please.”

Yeb shook his head. “No, Temu,” he said. As the boy opened his mouth, drawing in breath to protest, Yeb pressed his fingertips lightly against Temu’s lips, staying his voice. “I am not strong enough to bind your spirit and mine to this place without Ogotai. If something were to happen, if you were to let go of my hand beyond the jaqa line, I could not prevent you from returning to the spirit tree. Your mother would be very displeased with me if that should happen, I think.”

He was trying to make Temu smile, without success. Temu looked at him, disconcerted. “But what about you?”

“I can bind myself here, for a time at least,” Yeb said. “Long enough to open the jaqa and look for Ogotai.”

“But Yeb, please, I could—” Temu began. His voice faltered as a cold wind stirred through the forest. He could feel it seeping through him, sudden and bitter. He heard it rustling in the pine limbs overhead, and watched snowflakes sweep frantically about them. He felt Yeb’s hand tighten all the more against his; he listened to the sharp, startled intake of Yeb’s breath, and as the shaman moved, stepping in front of Temu

and easing the boy behind him, never releasing his grip against his hand, Temu remembered.

This is the jabsar, Yeb had told him, as Temu had marveled over how time had seemingly halted. The spiritual between. There is no time here, not in any measure we could hope to understand.

There is no time here, Temu realized. Nothing seems to move here because time does not move—so where did the wind come from?

“Keep behind me, Temu,” Yeb said, his voice low and quiet. He did not look over his shoulder to speak; his gaze was fixed on the shadow-draped forest, his brows furrowed, his free hand darting to his breast.

“What was that, Yeb?” Temu whispered, frightened.

“It was Ogotai.” Yeb coiled his fingers about his ongon. “Ogotai!” he called out sharply.

“Ogotai? But where is he?”

“I do not know,” Yeb said. “Ogotai!” he called again. “Bi sonusqu ci! Bi ayu ende! Yegun ayu tere?” *I hear you! I am here! What is it?*

“Why will he not show himself?” Temu asked, trembling.

“I do not think he can,” Yeb replied, his frown deepening. “I think he was trying to warn us. Something is keeping him away.”

“Something...?” Temu whispered.

“I am sending you back.” Yeb turned to face the boy, keeping fast hold of his hand. “Close your eyes, Temu, and listen to me. Repeat my words—say them now: ‘adag ene jegudun ba baraqu ene buyu—’”

“But, Yeb...” Temu breathed, glancing beyond Yeb’s shoulder toward the trees.

“There is no time, Temu,” Yeb said. “Say the words with me. ‘Adag ene jegudun—’”

“Yeb,” Temu said again, hissing through his teeth. He met Yeb’s eyes and then averted his gaze over the shaman’s shoulder again. Yeb fell silent, his breath stilling in his throat. He looked at Temu, and the boy could see his own sudden fear mirrored in Yeb’s eyes.

“There is someone there,” Temu whispered. “Beyond the jaqa, beneath the trees.”

Yeb was quiet for a long moment, his expression grim. “Keep behind me,” he said at length in a soft voice. “Do not let go of my hand, no matter what happens.”

“Yeb...” Temu said, wide-eyed, and the shaman turned.

A silhouetted figure stood among the shadows cast by the pines and sequoias. Neither Yeb nor Temu could discern more than the dark outline of a human form just beyond the perimeter of the jaqa line Yeb had drawn, outside of the circumference of light from the fire.

“Ken ayu tende?” Yeb called out. *Who is there?*

The silhouetted figure gave no reply. It shuddered slightly, moving in the shadows, and when it laughed, its voice low and ominous, Temu could feel it within his mind, whispering in his head like the scuttling of rats’ feet in dried leaves.

“Tende ayu manu jaga,” Yeb told the figure. The uncertainty and fear Temu had seen plainly in the shaman’s eyes was not reflected at all in Yeb’s firm tone, his

commanding voice. “Ta yadaqu getulku dotura ene yajar, seguder’kelberi.” *There is our border. You cannot pass into this place, shadow-form.*

The silhouette laughed again, the sensation of it crawling and shivering through Temu. He shied against Yeb’s back, closing his free hand against the soft wool of Yeb’s yellow khurim. When the figure spoke, Temu heard its voice within his mind, not with his ears, and he whimpered softly, cowering behind Yeb.

You cannot keep me from this place, yeke shaman, it hissed, and it stepped forward, moving toward them. *You do not have the power to prevent me, Yeb Oyugunde.*

“Keep your distance, unknown spirit!” Yeb shouted. “You are unwelcome here, and I will keep you from us as a shepherd keeps narsana from his herd—by vigilance or force, however I am able.”

The figure stepped into the dim, outermost edge of the firelight, its footsteps pausing along the line Yeb had drawn in the snow with salt. They could see it now; it was a woman. She stood before them, nude and pale, her skin as ashen as a corpse’s. Her hair was wet, clinging to her face and shoulders in sodden tangles. Water beaded along the contours of her narrow form. Her eyes were solid orbs of blackness, margins of the midnight sky captured between her lids and lashes.

Temu could see the woman’s gerel framing her body. It was not a sheath of light, like Rhyden’s, Yeb’s or his own; like her eyes, the woman’s gerel was black, a shroud of darkness about her, as though even the faintest glow feared to draw too close to her.

“You are a fool, yeke shaman,” the woman said, her voice moist and gurgling. As she spoke, water spurted from between her lips, dribbling down her chin, spattering

against her breasts. The corner of her mouth hooked in a menacing smile. “And you have delivered Dobun’s heir to me.”

“I know your name, Mongoljin Burilgitu,” Yeb said. “I know your face and your form, and I am unafraid of you. Go back to your dark waters, your foul and stagnant tomb. Go back to Tengriss and tell those who serve your Duua’s kin that you have failed.”

The woman, Mongoljin, laughed, more water spewing from her lips, gargling in her throat. “Failed?” she asked, and she stared right at Temu, her black eyes boring into him. *I have not even yet begun*, she hissed within his mind.

She drew her hand lightly through the air before her, and the edge of salt on the snow scattered, a brief margin of space opening in the line of the jaqa. The woman stepped through this opening and into the campsite. The salt moved again as she passed, whispering against the snow, drawing closed behind her once more. Temu uttered a soft, frightened cry, his fingers tightening against Yeb’s khurim. “Yeb...!” he whimpered.

“Stay behind me,” Yeb said, moving backwards, forcing Temu into stumbling step with him. “Ociqu, magu lus!” he shouted at the woman. *Leave, evil spirit!* He moved his hand, closing his fingers firmly about his toli.

I have waited five thousand years for this moment, Mongoljin said. *Foolish shaman, do you think you are strong enough to keep me from Dobun’s whelp? I will see you lost in the black plane of qarang’qui; I will see you broken in the shadows, your mind and will crushed by its eternal darkness.*

She thrust her hand toward Yeb, her long, pale fingers splayed wide, hooked in the air. As she moved, Yeb jerked his toli before him, holding it out, and Temu ducked his head, cowering. He felt something strike Yeb with enough force to send the shaman staggering back, and Temu along with him. He heard a loud, visceral toll like an untuned bell, and when he opened his eyes, blinking in fright, he saw that Yeb's toli had crimped inward, collapsing toward his palm. It was as though something mighty but invisible had slammed into them, and the amulet had born the brunt of its brutal force.

The only one who shall taste of eternal darkness this night, bitch-queen of Kharhorin, is you, Yeb snapped within Temu's mind, and then he released his toli, shoving his hand toward Mongoljin.

The woman's head snapped back on her neck as if Yeb had just delivered a swift, sharp punch to her chin. She stumbled, collapsing onto the ground, catching herself on her hands and her hip. She whipped her face toward Yeb, her brows furrowed, her lips drawn back in a snarl from her teeth. "Oirat bastard," she seethed.

Temu heard Yeb yelp softly, breathlessly, and then the shaman's feet were jerked out from beneath him. Temu cried out in terror as Yeb flew through the air, careening like a discarded toy.

"Yeb!" Temu wailed, as the shaman flew beyond the perimeter of the campsite, disappearing into the shadows beneath the surrounding trees. "Yeb—no! No!"

Temu started to run, darting across the clearing toward his friend, and he felt his feet skitter to a sudden, unexpected halt beneath him. It felt like an unseen snare line had tightened around his ankles; all at once, he was whipped around to face Mongoljin.

“You are Dobun’s heir,” Mongoljin said, rising once more and walking slowly toward Temu. She cackled, a horrible, slobbering sound. “I felt you wriggling and squirming in your mother’s womb, like a centipede inside of my head, eating behind my eyes. How I longed even then to shove dagger points through the soft meat of your eyes, to listen to you as you cawed and shrieked while I pierced your feeble mind.”

“Please...” Temu whimpered, drawing his hands to his face. “N-no, please...please...”

You cannot have him, Yeb said within Temu’s mind, and Mongoljin twisted sideways, thrown headlong into the trees, away from Temu. Temu turned and cried out to see Yeb floating out of the trees and toward the fire.

“Yeb!” he exclaimed.

Yeb’s gutal dangled above the ground, and he held his battered toli in one hand, thrust before him. His other hand was closed in a tight fist, and his brows were furrowed deeply, his face infused with rage.

This is my jaqa, witch, Yeb said. *I can cross it as I please—and I can drive you from it once more.*

You will die within its measure, shaman! Mongoljin screeched, shoving her hand toward Yeb, her fingers splayed widely. Yeb’s toli shattered in his hand, splintering into twisted fragments of metal as it again bore the massive brunt of some invisible, terrible strike. He whirled around in a circle, as though dancing from the force of the blow, the long, heavy hem of his del flapping about his legs and hips like wayward wings. He regained his poise in the air, and levitated himself higher above the campsite. The scarlet light surrounding him—his gerel—glowed all the more brightly, infusing within his

eyes now in a bright, furious blaze. He cast aside the ruined mirror and closed both of his hands into fists.

You cannot harm me here in the jabsar, he said to Mongoljin. You hold no power over me, or the boy. Leave now, before I send you crawling back to Tengriss.

Mongoljin thrust her hand out again, reaching toward Yeb's body, seated by the fire. Yeb's ami froze, his eyes flying wide and Mongoljin began to laugh again. *Have you forgotten your form, yeke shaman? she asked. Your little suni all alone in the mortal plane? It can be harmed...there is all of the power I need over you, Oirat.*

She began to fold her fingers slowly, deliberately in toward her palm. As she did, Yeb's body pitched over onto its side against the ground and began to contort. His chin dropped toward his sternum, and his arms and legs moved, drawing to his chest. His spine bowed, hunching inward; as Mongoljin closed her hand, Yeb's form collapsed into a huddle. His ami writhed helplessly in the air with the sudden, searing torment in his body. Yeb arched his back, his face twisting with terrible pain, and his voice escaped him in a strangled, hurting cry.

"Yeb—no!" Temu cried, stricken.

"I grow stronger by the moment, yeke shaman," Mongoljin said. "You should have stopped me when you yet might have had such a hope."

Temu...! Yeb gasped within the boy's mind. He shuddered as he struggled to look at Temu. *Temu—run!*

"No...!" Temu whimpered, shaking his head. He staggered in place, uncertain what to do, which Yeb to rush toward—his form or his spirit. "Yeb, no, please, I cannot leave you!"

Run away, Temu! Yeb cried in his mind. *She is a gazriin ezen, and I cannot keep her from you! Run into the forest...I beg of you—run away and find Ogotai—!*

Yeb's voice dissolved in an agonized shriek resounding through Temu's mind; Temu could hear his joints creaking, bending and straining against their sockets, his bones flexing nearly to the point of splintering.

"Yeb, no!" Temu wailed. Instead of bolting for the woods, he lunged at Mongoljin, getting his feet beneath him and springing toward the woman. He clasped her outstretched hand between his. "Stop it! You are killing him! Leave him alone!"

Mongoljin's other hand snapped out, her fingers closing about his throat. She jerked him off of the ground; she had the strength of a dozen men, surely in her arm, her grasp, and she threw Temuchin, sending him flying toward the fire. He crashed against the ground, the breath *whoofed* from him, his head striking hard enough to leave him reeling.

"Leave...him..." Yeb hissed.

"I will leave his corpse for the narsana to rip apart," Mongoljin said. "While his ami lingers eternally in qarang'qui, his suni shall rot here with his wretched form."

Temu raised his head and found himself facing his own body, still seated before the fire, his legs tucked beneath him, his eyes half-opened. He looked over his shoulder and saw his mother curled beside the fire, her hand hooked against Rhyden's.

"Mamma..." he croaked, crawling toward Aigiarn. "Mamma...help me...!"

Aigiarn did not move; she did not stir or flinch at his voice. He could see Toghrul beyond her shoulder, past the circumference of firelight, the silhouette of his sleeping

form beneath the canopy of the lean-to. “Toghrul!” Temu cried, bursting into tears.

“Mamma—Toghrul! Please! She is killing Yeb! Please help us!”

There was no use, and Temu realized it to his horror and dismay. Aigiarn and Toghrul could not hear him, because they were in the mortal plane. Temu’s spirit was somewhere in between, in the jabsar, neither a dream nor real. He could scream himself hoarse, plead until he was breathless and no one could hear him; no one could help him.

“Do not weep for the boy’s fate, yeke shaman,” Mongoljin said to Yeb. “For the two of you will share in it together—alone and shrieking until the end of time in qarang’qui.”

She threw her hands skyward and Yeb flew into the air, soaring into the pine boughs. He shrieked as he disappeared into the tree tops, and Temu stared, aghast and horrified, tears spilling down his cheeks, his voice escaping his throat in a soft, breathless mewl.

Temu, run! Yeb screamed within Temu’s mind, his voice shrill and hoarse. *Run away—get away from her! Run into the woods! Run—!*

He felt it when Yeb’s ami was taken into the qarang’qui; the gentle thrumming of his soul, the vibration of his spirit’s gerel fire within Temu’s mind suddenly fell still. His voice ripped to an abrupt, shrill halt, and Temu uttered a hiccupping, anguished sob.

“Yeb...!” he pleaded, falling onto his knees. “Oh...oh, no, please...Yeb...!”

He turned around, hooking his hands against Rhyden’s shoulder, shaking the Elf. “Rhyden!” he pleaded. “Rhyden, help me!” He folded himself over Rhyden’s body, huddled against him in terror, tucking his face against the nook of the Elf’s shoulder.

“Rhyden, please!” he wept, clutching at Rhyden’s blankets, his clothing, shuddering against him. “Please, Rhyden—please, you have hiimori! Please hear me! Help me! Please wake up! Please...I...I am frightened! Help me!”

He heard Mongoljin laughing softly, and he turned, moaning as she walked slowly toward him again. He shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“No...please...please do not...”

He staggered to his feet, stumbling away from Rhyden and his mother. He whirled about and raced for the trees. As his gutal toes met the line of salt Yeb had drawn in the snow, it felt as though Temu plowed headlong into a stone wall. He staggered backward, his feet floundering from beneath him. He sat down hard in the snow, and blinked in bewildered terror at the trees in front of him.

I drew a ring around our campsite, Yeb had told him, and Temu moaned again in horrified realization. It is a jaqa, as a spiritual barrier, to keep our uthas within—yours, mine and Rhyden’s—and keep any spirits or spells the Khahl send to spy upon us from drawing near.

“No...!” he whispered. He scrambled to his feet and rushed for the forest again. Again, he slammed into the invisible barrier, the binding spell of the jaqa, and he reeled backwards.

They cannot cross the line of salt I have drawn about our camp, Yeb had said, and Temu began to weep again, his breath shuddering beneath his chest.

I am trapped here! he thought. *I cannot cross the jaqa! I cannot get away!*

Mongoljin laughed softly, chuckling to herself. “Where will you go?” she asked. “Your yeke shaman has bound and abandoned you here, within this circle, little heir.

You are not strong enough to pass the jaqa, like your Yeb Oyugundei, or me. What will you do, whelp? Where will you go?"

Temu turned toward her, stumbling until he felt his shoulders strike the unyielding boundary of the jaqa. He trembled as he watched her approach him. "Father..." he pleaded, drawing his hands toward his heart, clutching at Yesugei's ongon. "Father, please...please help me..."

He looked desperately about for Yesugei, but there was no one there. No one but his family, his friends, asleep and oblivious in the mortal plane, and this woman, this gazriin ezen, Mongoljin with him in the jabsar.

"F-Father...!" Temu cried, cowering against the jaqa. "Father...please...where are you? Please...please...!"

"There is no one left to help you," Mongoljin said, stretching her hand toward him. She brushed her fingertips against the air, and the ongon snapped loose from about his neck. Temu cried out, trying to grab it as it darted away from him, sailing across the campsite and landing in the shadows beyond the fire.

Mongoljin waved her hand again, and this time, the strap of sinew holding the toli Yeb had given to him about his neck jerked. He heard it break, and then the mirror flew away from his breast.

He tried to run, ducking his head and fleeing for the far side of the campsite, but Mongoljin caught him with her buyu, her unseen hands, and she jerked him backwards, sending him staggering into the jaqa wall again.

“You are the one Ag’iamon would see rebuild the empire?” Mongoljin asked. “The lord of dragons and men who would claim my Duua’s throne?” She tilted her head back and cackled. “You are more child than man—and more mouse than dragon.”

Father, help me! Temu cried within his mind. *Father, please! Yeb said you were always with me! He told me so! Please—help me!*

“There will be no dragons for you, little heir,” Mongoljin said softly, spreading her fingers toward him. The corners of her mouth were lifted in a cruel smile, and her black eyes glittered with cold, malicious light. “No throne, no empire. There will be only darkness in your destiny...the black nothing of the qarang’qui.”

Chapter Two

Rhyden dreamed of walking along the soft, cold mud of the Tolui Bay shoreline. He could feel the cold press of the night wind, the tickling patters of snowflakes against his face, and he listened to the soft, burbling sounds of water lapping along the beach. The Oirat camp was nearby; he could glance over his shoulder and spy golden hints of their campfire light among the trees. He did not remember waking, or leaving the camp to come down to the water's edge. He knew he must be dreaming, and looked around, his eyes scanning the dark-draped margin where the sea found its way ashore. He was not the least bit surprised to find Trejaeran ahead of him, also strolling along the beach, with his back to Rhyden, his hands clasped lightly against the small of his back.

"Hullo, bidein," Rhyden said, broadening his stride, letting his long legs close the distance between them.

"All of the things, in all of the Bith you could be dreaming about, and you dream of this," Trejaeran said, turning. He smiled broadly at Rhyden, arching his brow. "At this very moment, a beautiful woman is sleeping near you—holding your hand, for the love of the Good Mother—and you are here on the beach in your mind with me."

"A woman?" Rhyden asked. "You mean Aigiarn?" He looked over his shoulder in surprise. "She is holding my hand?"

"She might hold your heart, if you would let her."

Rhyden smiled as he drew beside Trejaeran. "She is still in love with her husband, bidein." A quick look down showed Trejaeran walked barefooted, despite the bitter water, the frigid air, and Rhyden chuckled, shaking his head.

“Her husband is dead, Rhyden.” Trejaeran noticed his attention on his feet and laughed sheepishly, tucking his dark hair behind his tapered ears. “I like to feel the mud between my toes,” he said, lifting his left foot and wiggling it demonstratively. “I cannot do that—feel things—unless I visit inside of your mind.”

Trejaeran had seemed exhausted to Rhyden in the dream of the palace, but Rhyden had been too absorbed in his own selfish grief and pain to realize it fully. He realized it now as he saw the ashen cast of Trejaeran’s pallor, the fatigue apparent in his face, and his light-hearted mood dimmed, his expression turning grave.

“Are you alright, bidein?” Rhyden whispered, reaching for Trejaeran, touching his friend’s shoulder.

Trejaeran nodded. He pressed the heel of his hand against his brow and sighed quietly. “I...hoah, I am just tired, Rhyden,” he said. “I am sorry I have kept away. I had to do something and I am still weakened for it.”

“You drove the Khahl’s shaman spirits away,” Rhyden said. “Two days ago. I thought I felt you...your presence...”

Trejaeran nodded. “They are gone for now,” he said. “But they will come back. They are looking for you.” He looked troubled as he said this, his brows drawing slightly, his gaze wandering toward the trees beyond Rhyden’s shoulder. “I will keep them away,” he said. “But I need to rest.”

“Did the Khahl attack the Uru’ut aysil, Trejaeran?” Rhyden asked.

“I do not know,” Trejaeran replied. “I cannot see it. I could go there and find out, but it would weaken me even more. But if you asked me to, Rhyden, I would.”

He looked at Rhyden, his blue eyes tired but earnest, and Rhyden blinked at him, disconcerted and confused by his words. “No, bidein,” he said, shaking his head. “No.”

“I have worried you,” Trejaeran said with a tired, fleeting smile. He patted his hand against Rhyden’s arm. “I am sorry. I will be alright...another day or two, and my strength will have restored in full. I used too much of my energy against the shamans.” He chuckled. “I think the Oirat are right. You must have separate souls for your mind and body—and the body spirit must hold all of your vigor. I do not know where my body’s soul went when I died, but Mathair Maith, I miss it sometimes. I am fairly well spent with little effort.” He smiled at Rhyden. “Being near to you, being drawn into your mind like this helps. I get my strength from you, from your sight.”

Rhyden stopped in his tracks, bewildered. “But I...” he said. “The only reason I have the sight is because of you, Trejaeran.”

Trejaeran’s smile widened slightly. “No, Rhyden,” he said. “You are wrong.”

Rhyden blinked at him in confusion as Trejaeran walked along the beach again. “What?” He followed Trejaeran, reaching out and catching him by his sleeve, drawing his gaze. “What are you talking about, bidein? You took the sight from me—from all of the Elves. You gave it back to me and Qynh when the Book of Shadows was destroyed. She told me that. She said you had meant to all along.”

“I know what Qynh said,” Trejaeran said. “Because that is what I told her. I gave the sight back to her when the Book was destroyed, but I had not meant to all along. I gave it back to her for you, Rhyden, because you love her. Because you are lonely without her, and I thought to see her...to sense her would make you happy. I did not

know it would only hurt you. I have caused you so much pain...all of these years, and I have never meant for any of it.”

“What?” Rhyden asked. “Trejaeran, you have never caused me pain. Why would you think such a thing? I do not understand.”

“I know you do not,” Trejaeran said and he looked at Rhyden for a long moment. “You have hurt for so long, all of it for me,” he said at last, his voice quiet and plaintive. “You do not know what I would give to take that from you, to make you understand. You could not have stopped me, Rhyden.”

Rhyden’s breath tangled in shocked surprise. “What...? I...I do not...”

“You could not have stopped me,” Trejaeran said again, stepping toward him. His face was kind, filled with tender sorrow. “You could not have prevented what happened, no matter how fast you had run, no matter what words you might have found to offer had you reached me in time. I knew what I had to do. I would not have been dissuaded.”

Rhyden took a hedging step away from his friend. “You do not know that. You say that now, but I...I might have...”

“The Shadow was upon me, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said. “It had always been with me, a shade upon my heart. I had tasted of the duchar. I knew its power, its allure. You know this. In your heart, you know it is true.”

“No,” Rhyden said, stricken. “No, you never, bidein...you defeated it. You defeated the duchar’s sway.”

“But I always remembered it,” Trejaeran said. “It was always there, a soft voice whispering inside of me, tempting me. You did not want to believe it, but you knew it in

your heart, and you know it now, Rhyden. You could sense it within me. I know you could.”

“No,” Rhyden whispered.

“When I was alone in the caves with the Book of Shadows, after Lahnduren had fallen into the chasm, I could feel the allure of the Book, of the Shadow’s power. It called to me, Rhyden. It pressed itself within my mind; it crawled into my heart and I wanted it. I wanted its power, its strength.”

“That is untrue,” Rhyden said, his eyes widening in horror. “No, bidein, that...why are you saying this? Please—it is not true.”

“It *is*, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said, meeting his gaze. “I took the sight from the Elves because I wanted the Book’s power for myself. I did not want anyone else to claim it and I knew if I stripped the sight from them, no one else ever could.”

Rhyden recoiled, staggering in stunned disbelief. He whimpered softly, a disbelieving, anguished sound. “You cannot mean that.”

“The Book was strong, Rhyden. Stronger than me. I could not resist it. I did not want to. I wanted it to be mine—I wanted all of the dark magic it commanded for myself. I was consumed by it even before I lay my hands against it. I wanted it. I saw the fire of the anam’cladh’s blade yield to shadow and I could feel the power within me like music, like the wind. I saw visions within my mind—dark armies of countless thousands at my bidding, conquering Tiralainn, taking the Bith for me by force. I saw it and I wanted it. I reached out with my mind—I stripped the sight from the Elves, and then, by my breath, Rhyden, I meant to claim it. I meant to give myself fully to the Shadow.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Rhyden whispered in dismay. Trejaeran approached again and he stumbled away.

“You told Aigiarn you might have saved me that day,” Trejaeran said. “Had you been a stride or two faster, if you had been able to talk to me, convince me.” He reached for Rhyden, meaning to touch his face, but Rhyden flinched, drawing back. “You did save me, Rhyden. As I took the sight away, I sensed you in the caverns. You were hurt...”

When Trejaeran had stripped the sight from the Elves, the force of his mind’s power had rocked the caverns beneath the Midland Mountains, where he had chased Lahnduren and the Book—where Rhyden had followed in a desperate attempt to protect him. The Bith itself had quaked with Trejaeran’s might, and the caves and tunnels had collapsed around Rhyden. His ankle had been crushed, the bones splintered and shattered; he had broken ribs, and been struck brutally in the head by falling stone and debris.

“I could sense your pain,” Trejaeran said. “But more than that, I could sense your love or me. You were hurt, but you kept coming. I could feel you crawling through the rubble. You wanted so badly to reach me. I could feel it within you, your love for me. You did not care about yourself, your pain. There was nothing in your heart and mind but me. I felt this and I realized what I had done, what I meant to do, and I was shamed for it—broken. Your love for me...your heart, Rhyden, had the strength my own lacked and because of it—because of you—for one moment, that one, fleeting moment, I was myself again. The Shadow’s hold slipped and I knew what I had to do. The only thing I could do.”

“Trejaeran...” Rhyden whispered.

“You gave me the chance,” Trejaeran said. “You set me free and because of you...because of your love, your faith in me, I found the strength to end it, to defeat the Shadow once and for all. You gave me that one moment when my heart was pure again, when I could call the fire of the anam’cladh out of nothing but selfless love—yours, Rhyden.”

He touched Rhyden’s face, and Rhyden did not recoil from him. “There would have been no keeping me from it,” Trejaeran whispered. “I only found the strength to free myself, Rhyden—to free us all—because of you. Because of the measure of your love for me—the measure of your heart. That is what I meant...that is always what I meant when I told you ‘the measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds.’ I knew you would find me, what you had think had happened—what you would I think I had done and why—and there was not time to tell you the truth in full. I knew the Book would stir again; it would wait for its chance and that it had to be destroyed.”

Trejaeran’s eyes shimmered with tears. “When you came to me in the tunnels, when you found me, held my hand, I gave the sight back to you. I used whatever strength, whatever power remained in me to restore it because I knew you could resist the Book’s powers. You were stronger than me; you could resist the Shadow’s sway and you could see the Book destroyed. You were so brokenhearted...all of these years, you have judged yourself so harshly by those words, and you never knew. You did not realize and I did not tell you...there was not time, and all along, the sight has always been with you.”

Rhyden blinked at him, stunned anew. “W-what...?”

“It was not my power that opened your mind again after you destroyed the Book,” Trejaeran said. “It was yours, Rhyden. Your power protected you, shielded you all of these years, repressing itself, keeping you safe from the Shadow, and when you destroyed the Book...when it was safe for your mind and heart to open again, they did.

“My deeds...my sight could never compare to the strength of your heart, Rhyden. All of my power, all of the things I could do with my mind, and in the end, I was nothing next to your measure. I have remained with you all of these years...I bound myself to you because I am so grateful to you. And I always will be.”

Trejaeran held up his hand, cradling the silver hilt of a bladeless sword against his palm, offering it to Rhyden. “I want to give you this. I want you to have it.”

Rhyden had seen the hilt before and recognized the narrow, elongated grip, the unadorned pommel, the long quillons that swept forward toward the tang. He blinked at Trejaeran, stricken and confused.

“The anam’cladh?” he whispered.

“Yes,” Trejaeran said, and he curled his fingers about the hilt. As his hand closed around it, a sudden, bright spear of blue light extended from the hilt, a blade of cerulean fire that blazed against the cold backdrop of the night.

The anam’cladh was an ancient, magical weapon and had once been Trejaeran’s to wield by legacy. It had been forged by the first beings believed to have inhabited the Bith ages ago, an immortal, powerful race called the Na’Siogai. When the hand of a Na’Siogai closed about the hilt of an anam’cladh, a blade of fire would appear, a physical manifestation of their souls. The Elfin royal family, into which Trejaeran and his sister Qynh had been born, were said to be direct descendents of the Na’Siogai, and by

this birthright, the two were the only ones yet living who could summon the anam'cladh's fiery blade. Trejaeran had used this blade, the anam'cladh he held in his hand to take his own life fifteen years earlier.

“The anam'cladh's fire—the purity of my soul—was restored because of you, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said. “I want you to have it.”

“No,” Rhyden said, shaking his head, backing away from Trejaeran. “No, I cannot take it. I cannot wield it. It is yours—yours and Qynh's. I am not of Na'Siogai descent. It would be nothing in my hand but an empty hilt. I cannot call its fire and I...you used it to...”

“I used it to defeat the Shadow,” Trejaeran said. “Because you gave me the strength to do it, Rhyden. Our history tells us that I am of Na'Siogai descent, just as it told us that the Shadow Stone corrupted Ciardha's heart and infused the Book of Shadows with its dark magic. You know differently now—you know that we were wrong all along. The Stone was not evil—Ciardha and her book were dark and wicked on their own. We were wrong about the Stone, and we have been wrong about the anam'cladh, too.”

Trejaeran pressed the hilt of the sword against Rhyden's palm. As it left Trejaeran's hand, the blue fire of its blade winked out, disappearing. “You have as much right by birth to bear this sword in hand as I do,” he said. “All of the mortal races—Elves, menfolk, Fathacan, Abhacan—we feel the same, think the same, believe in much the same things in much the same ways. We look different from one another, but it is not our size, our form, our culture that makes us all kindred. It is our hearts, and here, we are all born alike—all from the same.”

He cupped his fingers against Rhyden's, folding them gently about the hilt. As Rhyden closed his hand, another blade of fire appeared, a gleaming, brilliant shaft of golden fire. Rhyden gasped, startled and amazed as the light spilled upon his face, dazzling him. "Hoah..." he breathed.

"It will protect you," Trejaeran said. "Its fire will keep you safe, if something should happen...if I cannot."

Rhyden looked from the anam'cladh's blade, blinking at Trejaeran. "What? Trejaeran, what do you—"

A gust of wind buffeted against them, rushing from out of the forest, stirring through the trees. Snowflakes whirled and whipped about in the abrupt current of air. Trejaeran turned toward the woods, his brows narrowed, his lips drawing together in a thin line. The wind ruffled his hair, flapping wayward strands against his temples and cheeks as it waned, and he closed his hands into fists.

"What was that?" Rhyden asked in a low voice, following Trejaeran's gaze. He shifted his fingers lightly against the hilt of the anam'cladh, clasping it comfortably, in a ready grip without even realizing it.

"I do not know," Trejaeran replied grimly.

A bird burst out from the pine trees, an enormous hawk, flapping its broad wings and screeching shrilly as it swooped toward them. Rhyden backpedaled in alarm, remembering his dreams of ravens, visions shared by Yeb and Temu that had symbolized the approach of the Kahl. He leveled the sword, his feet settling reflexively into a fighting stance.

“No, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said, holding out his arm. He followed the hawk with his eyes as it circled above them and out over the water, crying out repeatedly in an urgent, nearly frantic tone.

“Is it a vision?” Rhyden asked. “Something the sight is showing me? Is it the Khahl, Trejaeran?”

“Your sight is showing it to you, but it is no vision—and it is not the Khahl,” Trejaeran said quietly as the hawk hooked its wings and soared toward the forest again. It circled them again and again, calling to them, flying into the trees and then out once more, as though trying to beckon them. “It is Ogotai.”

“Ogotai?” Rhyden asked. “Yeb’s utha, his spirit guide? What is it doing here? What does it want?”

“To warn us, I think.” Trejaeran walked away from the water’s edge, approaching the forest, letting the hawk lead him toward the trees. “Something is out there. I have had a sense of it since before the sun went down tonight, and Ogotai has, too.”

“The shaman spirits have returned?” Rhyden asked, hurrying after Trejaeran.

Trejaeran shook his head, meeting Rhyden’s gaze. “I do not think so. It is strong, whatever it is...and it is very close now.”

Run away, Temu! Yeb’s voice suddenly screamed within Rhyden’s mind. Rhyden staggered, his breath tangling in his throat. His hand darted for his brow, and he grimaced as he pressed his palm against his forehead, Yeb’s shriek resounding in his skull.

“Yeb!” he gasped, hooking his fingers in his hair. “Trejaeran, that was Yeb—!”

She is a gazriin ezen, and I cannot keep her from you! Yeb cried out. *Run into the forest...I beg of you—run away and find Ogotai—*

Yeb's voice cut off abruptly inside of Rhyden's mind, and the sudden silence terrified him more than the shaman's frantic shrieks. It was as though Yeb was gone; he had not simply been muffled, or knocked unconscious. His presence—for that fleeting moment, bright and apparent within Rhyden's mind—was completely gone, as though he had been obliterated from the face of the Bith itself.

"Mathair Maith...Yeb...!" Rhyden breathed. He turned to Trejaeran, his eyes flown wide. "He was screaming to Temu! I have to go to him!"

"Go," Trejaeran told him, nodding sharply toward the woods. "I will follow you when I can. I am going to find Yeb first—something has happened to his spirit, and I must hurry."

Rhyden was already sprinting across the beach, even as Trejaeran spoke. He was seized with bright panic and overwhelming terror.

Rhyden! he heard Temu cry out within his mind. *Rhyden, help me!*

"Temu!" Rhyden screamed, crashing through the trees, ducking his head as low-hanging boughs slapped him across the face and tugged against his hair.

Please, Rhyden—please, you have hiimori! Please hear me! Help me!

"I hear you!" Rhyden cried, bolting for the campsite, clutching the anam'cladh in his fist, letting its bright fire guide him through the woods. "Temu, I am coming!"

Please wake up! Please...I...I am frightened! Help me!

"Temu!" Rhyden called out, anguished. He reached the clearing where the Oirat had camped for the night, and saw Temuchin cowering beyond the lean-tos, his hands

drawn toward his face, his eyes enormous and stricken with terror. A woman stood before him, her hand outstretched, her fingers hooked into claws as she reached for his head. For some reason, she was nude, her body ghastly pale, like a corpse's, and her hair looked wet, hanging down the length of her back in sopping tangles.

"Temu!" Rhyden cried, racing to the boy. He did not understand—none of the Oirat had awoken. He could see them beneath the canopies, curled together and asleep, as though nothing were amiss, a stranger was not among them, threatening Temu.

"Rhyden!" Temu wailed, and Rhyden could see that he was weeping, his little chest hitching with uncontrollable sobs. Why he did not simply turn around and scamper into the trees, Rhyden did not know. Temu trembled in place as though he stood before a wall only he could see, as though he could not go any further. "Rhyden, help me!"

The woman whipped her face to Rhyden, her brows furrowed, her mouth opened in a gruesome, vicious sneer. Rhyden leaped, diving headlong against her, tackling her. The two of them slammed hard against the ground; the force of their impact was enough to jar the anam'cladh from Rhyden's fingers.

Whoever she was, the woman was as strong as a bear. She struggled beneath Rhyden, grappling with him, her voice flying from her lips with a spray of spittle in a garble of fierce, angry Ulusian words. Her strength—her ferocity—caught him off guard. She managed to wrestle him off of her, knocking him sideways and then pounced on top of him, landing hard against his stomach and groin, *whoofing* the breath from him. She clamped her hands around his throat, her nails digging into his flesh, her palms mashed against his vulnerable windpipe.

“Who are you?” she hissed. “Are you the pretty little falcon Ag’iamon promised would come? You do not look like a bird to me.” It was not spittle raining from her lips, but water. She spewed it with every word; it gurgled in her throat and splattered from her mouth, trailing down her chin. Her eyes were solid black, with no discernable corneas or irises, and Rhyden tried to scream around the unyielding, crushing pressure of her hands.

She is not human! his mind shrieked. *She is dead—she is a dead woman!*

He bucked his hips violently beneath her as felt her weight shift as she moved her leg, meaning to ram her knee into his crotch. Rhyden gagged for air, pivoting, trying to block her blow with his thigh. He reached up, closed his fist in her hair and yanked with all of his might. The woman shrieked as he wrenched her head back, and she struggled against him. He managed to force his left leg up, folding his knee and planting the sole of his gutal firmly against her belly. He punted hard, kicking her off of him. He felt her hands slip away from his throat, and he gasped for air.

“Rhyden!” Temu cried, frightened.

“Temu—keep away—!” Rhyden wheezed. He leaped to his feet, landing on his toes and heard Temu scream.

“Rhyden, behind you!”

Rhyden whirled just as the woman lunged at him. She had her hands outstretched as if she had meant to leap astride his shoulders and hook her arms about his neck, throttling him again. He jerked sideways, out of her path and caught her hand as she rushed past. He heard her sharp, startled cry as he craned her wrist between his palms, hyperextending her arm, straining her shoulder in its socket. He released her

hand and she staggered away from him. As she stumbled about, turning to face him, Rhyden pivoted and kicked, snapping his leg out and delivering his heel against the side of her head, catching her beneath the angle of her jaw. She uttered another cry and crumpled to the ground, face-first in the snow.

“Rhyden!” Temu cried, bursting into new tears. Rhyden turned, rushing to the boy just as Temu darted for him, his hands outstretched. Rhyden caught him in his arms, holding him fiercely, drawing him against his chest.

“Temu,” Rhyden said, cupping his hand against the back of Temu’s head. Temu shuddered against him, his fingers clutching desperately at Rhyden’s del. “It is alright. I am here. Hush now, it is alright.”

“She...she hurt Yeb!” Temu wailed, his voice muffled as he pressed his face against Rhyden’s chest. “Rhyden, please—she sent him into the qarang’qui, she...she...!”

“Who is she?” Rhyden asked. “Temu, what does that woman want?”

Something plowed into him with the force of an enraged, charging bull. It struck his side, throwing him off of his feet, tearing him away from Temu. Rhyden flew through the air, and then slammed against the ground, bearing the brunt of the fall with his hip, smacking the side of his head hard enough to see stars.

“Rhyden!” Temu cried out.

Rhyden groaned, shoving his hand beneath him and raising his head from the ground. He tasted blood in his mouth, could feel it dribbling down his upper lip in a thin trail from his nose and he winced, spitting. He had landed near enough to the campfire to see Aigiarn laying beside of the blaze. She was curled on her side, her eyes closed,

her expression peaceful, completely oblivious to the fact that her son was being attacked only feet away from her. Rhyden blinked in start to see himself, his own form asleep by the fire as well, exactly where he remembered lying down. Aigiarn slept near to him, her head nearly touching his, and Trejaeran had been right; Aigiarn's hand rested atop Rhyden's, her fingers twined loosely through his own.

He blinked again in even more bewilderment to realize Temu sat by the fire, staring into the flames, his face soft, his eyes distant and sleepily lidded. Yeb lay on the ground beside him in a lifeless huddle, with his knees and hands drawn toward his chest. The two Kelet Toghrul had assigned to the watch sat nearby, their heads tucked together in quiet conversation.

"What?" Rhyden whispered. "What in the duchan...?" It was just like the dream of Qynh and the royal palace, when he had watched her brush her hair, when he had helplessly listened to Kierken make love to her. It was as though he was a ghost, a dim shade trapped and wavering between twilight and nightfall. He was the dream, while everything around him was reality. Only this time, it seemed he had brought Temu along with him, and the woman.

He heard footsteps crunching softly in the snow, and looked over his shoulder to see her walking slowly toward him, her hand outstretched, her face twisted with murderous fury.

"No! Do not hurt him!" Temu wailed, lunging at the woman. She swung her arm toward the boy, and Temu's feet left the ground. He snapped backward in the air like a naughty puppet yanked upon its strings. He seemed to strike something solid, though there was nothing but empty air that Rhyden could see. Whatever Temu hit, the woman

held him pinned there, his gutal suspended at least three feet above the ground, his feet pedaling frantically, kicking at the open space beneath him. The woman moved his hand, reaching out for Temu's body, his form seated by the fire. She curled her fingers together, folding them in to her palm, and all at once, the Temu that floated in the air behind her flapped his hands at his throat, his breath and voice whooping from him as though he was strangling.

"Temu!" Rhyden scrambled to his feet. He stared at the woman, stricken and bewildered. Trejaeran had been the only person Rhyden had ever known who could move things with his mind, but this woman apparently shared the ability.

She is a gazriin ezen, Yeb had screamed. I cannot keep her from you!

He recognized that word, *gazriin ezen*. It was a sort of spirit. Yeb had told him of them once, and Temu had made mention, as well. They considered Trejaeran to be an *endur*, a powerful soul that dwelled within the sky; a *gazriin ezen* was a spirit of equal strength and power, one that was found on the ground, in nature.

Trejaeran, where are you? Rhyden thought. I need you—this is beyond me. I cannot stop this thing. Help me.

There was no reply. Trejaeran had said something about going after Yeb, that something had happened to his spirit

She hurt Yeb! Temu had cried. She sent him into the qarang'qui!

Rhyden did not know what the *qarang'qui* was—but he was willing to wager it was nothing pleasant.

"Let him go," he said to the woman, walking toward her. He held out his hands to her in implore. "Let the boy go. I am right here."

The woman looked at him for a long moment. “You are bleeding.”

Rhyden brushed his fingertips against his nose; his glove came away spotted with scarlet, and he met the woman’s gaze. “Let him go,” he said again. “Whatever you want—I am here.”

“You can feel pain here,” the woman said, and she giggled softly, her voice moist and bubbling.

Temu blinked at Rhyden, hiccupping for breath, his frightened eyes suddenly growing all the more alarmed. “No...!” he whimpered, pawing at the empty air before his throat, as though trying to loosen choking hands. “No...no...Rhyden...!”

“You can feel pain here,” the woman said again, laughing more loudly now, her breasts shivering against her pale torso. This seemed to astound and amaze her—and to dismay Temu—for reasons Rhyden did not understand.

Rhyden caught sight of a glimmer of firelight upon silver out of the corner of his eye, and he glanced to his left without turning his head, alerting the woman. He could see the anam’cladh hilt lying in the snow and pine needles. It had been thrown near the campfire during the scuffle, and winked with soft, reflected glow. He stepped slowly toward it, fixing his gaze on the woman, keeping his hands raised.

“Yes,” he told her. “I can feel pain here.”

“Good,” the woman said, and she thrust her hand at Rhyden. The effect was instantaneous; again, something that felt like a catapulted mule slammed against Rhyden’s chest. It stunned the wind from his lungs, snapped his head back on the axis of his neck and sent him careening backwards, his feet flying from the ground. He

struck the broad trunk of a pine, his shoulders and spine smashing painfully against the tree and he collapsed, crumpling into the snow.

“No!” Temu cried. “No, no—do not hurt him!”

The woman hooked her fingers in the air like talons and dragged them down through the air. Rhyden heard an ominous groan from above him as he lifted his head dazedly, a grinding snap and then a loud, fervent rustle. He tucked his chin and rolled, kicking with his legs. He flipped onto his side and then onto his back, just as a long, fat length of pine bough crashed against the ground, falling from the tree and landing where he had only just been lying.

“Mathair Maith—!” he gasped, trying to rise, getting his knees beneath him. The branch snapped up from the ground and swung in a broad, sharp arc, slamming into the side of his head, sending him sprawling into the snow again. The blow knocked the wits from him and he lay against the ground, gasping for breath, his senses reeling.

“Rhyden!” Temu wailed, and then his voice dissolved into garbled, gagging sounds as he choked.

“No...” Rhyden whispered, his brows furrowed, his teeth gritted. He shoved his palms against the ground and forced himself up. The heavy tree limb lay across his hips; he shifted his weight and hooked his heel against the bough, kicking it away from him. He rose to his feet, stumbling dizzily and limping. He could taste more blood in his mouth, could feel it sliding down his face from a deep gash along his hairline. He turned to the woman, his vision side-slipping, canting blearily. “Leave him alone.”

The woman threw back her head and laughed at him. “No.”

Temu's struggles in midair had waned into feeble, weak effort. His form by the fire twitched slightly, his face infused with deep, strained color. Rhyden could hear him, his frantic gulping pants for breath, his heart fluttering in terror beneath his chest.

"Let him go," he told the woman again, closing his hands into fists.

"No," she said, and again, the invisible force slammed into him. It struck from behind this time, sending him flying forward. His knees struck the ground first as he landed and the rest of him crashed in turn, with his chin smacking against the snow last.

Rhyden moaned, his fingers scrabbling against the snow as he spit out a mouthful of snow and loose grit. He could see the anam'cladh; being thrown forward toward the fire had actually knocked him closer to the blade. It was lying just beyond the perimeter of the stones outlining the bed of coals and firewood, just beyond the full reach of Rhyden's outstretched arm. He scooted toward it, gasping softly as pain speared through his chest with the movement. He had likely cracked some ribs from the feel of things, and he winced.

Who are you? the woman hissed within his mind. It felt like a hand suddenly closed in his hair, and Rhyden gasped again as his head jerked back, his chin forced skyward. He could feel the woman's presence, her mind whispering within him.

You bear the mark of a slave, she said, and he felt invisible, icy fingertips slide against his cheek, tracing the curved lines of his catasta tattoo. The fingertips followed the contour of his cheek, brushing lightly against the tapered point of his ear. *But not the form of any slave or free man I have ever seen. Who are you? What are you?*

He could feel her probing within his mind, trying to learn his secrets, his thoughts. His brows furrowed defiantly, and he shook his head against the force that had seized his hair.

Get out of my head, you bitch, he thought. Let the boy go and I will tell you.

I cannot read your mind, she said, sounding surprised and aggravated. The pressure against his hair tightened, wrenching his head back all the more, and he gasped again. Why is your mind closed to me? No mind is closed to me! Why do you feel pain—how can you bleed—in the jabsar? Your gerel is bright and strong—you cross the jaqa like a yeke shaman, yet you use no powers to defend yourself, or the whelp. You stand against me in the jabsar, but you fight as though we are in the mortal plane—with your body, your fists and feet—not hiimori or buyu. Who are you? What are you?

Let the boy go and I will tell you, he said again, and he moved his right hand now, reaching slowly, blindly for the anam'cladh. His fingertips fumbled against the ground, brushing against the snow, groping for the silver hilt.

I do not need you to tell me, man-falcon, she said. Whatever you are—whoever you may be—it will not matter when you are dead.

She moved her hand, splaying her fingers toward Rhyden's sleeping form beside the fire. Again, as she had with Temu, the woman closed her fingers together, curling them into a fist, and as she did, Rhyden felt an icy, crushing pain seize his chest. He gasped, twisting sharply, arching his back as agony lanced through him. It felt like her hand had reached into his breast and closed against his heart, crushing the rhythm and life from it.

He tried to cry out. He tried to scream for Trejaeran, but the pain was too great. He could not breathe, as though her fingers squeezed his lungs, collapsing them in upon themselves, smothering him. He gasped helplessly, his hand abandoning its desperate search for the anam'cladh as he pawed at his chest. He hooked his fingertips against the front of his del, wheezing for breath as he fought to jerk the overcoat open.

As the pressure within his chest tightened, Rhyden heard a loud thud. At the sound, the icy grip upon his heart, his lungs released, the grasp on his hair loosened and he collapsed forward, hanging his head. He shoved his palm against his aching chest, panting for breath.

He lifted his head and realized Temu had dropped to the ground. The boy lay in a motionless heap against the snow, and Rhyden moaned softly, stricken. "No..." he whispered, anguished. "No...no, please..."

The woman frowned, her expression puzzled as she looked between Temu and Rhyden. She reached out toward the boy, and Temu raised in the air again. As he moved, he groaned softly, stirring, wiggling his arms and legs.

"Temu!" Rhyden cried, his voice damaged and hoarse. He tried to rise to his feet, but the woman whirled to him, her black eyes flashing in the firelight, her brows drawn. Her other hand shot in his direction, and again, pain stabbed through his heart. Rhyden cried out, collapsing forward, clutching at his chest.

The moment her attention turned from Temu to Rhyden, however, the boy fell again, grunting as he toppled to the ground. The woman blinked at him, and then at Rhyden, the cleft between her brows deepening. She was apparently not doing this on purpose, and had no idea why it was happening.

All at once, Rhyden realized.

I...hoah, I am just tired, Rhyden, Trejaeran had told him. I am sorry I have kept away. I had to...to do something and it...I am still weakened for it.

The woman was a gazriin ezen, a nature spirit likely equal to Trejaeran in capability and strength. Rhyden did not doubt that the Khahl shamans had found a way to conjure this spirit, to solicit its aid in their efforts against the Oirat as a means of countering Trejaeran's formidable abilities and powers.

I am sorry, Rhyden, Trejaeran had said. I will be alright...another day or two, and my strength will have restored in full. I used too much of my energy against the shamans.

Rhyden snickered, despite the pain in his chest, and the woman turned to him.

What is so funny, man-falcon? she snapped inside of his mind. She closed her fingers more tightly, and Rhyden groaned, falling forward, pressing his forehead against the ground in agony.

"It...it is nothing..." he gasped, and made himself laugh again, more loudly. "The Oirat are right, that is...that is all."

"What are you talking about?" she said.

Rhyden moved his hand slowly, forcing his fingers to creep again across the ground toward the anam'cladh hilt. "We must have separate souls for your mind and body—and the body spirit holds all of our vigor. You must miss it sometimes."

His fingertips brushed lightly against the pommel of the sword, and he nearly burst into tears of desperate relief. It took every measure of restraint he possessed not to pounce on the anam'cladh, to snatch it in hand, because he knew if he did, she would

take it from him. If Trejaeran was right, and any soul in the Bith could wield the flaming sword, he did not care to imagine what might happen if it came into the hands of this deranged woman-spirit.

I do not understand your meaning, she said.

Rhyden looked up at her, meeting her gaze. “I mean you have overextended yourself, you stupid bitch,” he hissed between clenched teeth. “Your spirit is not strong enough to sustain itself for long on its own. You did too much and you are weak for it now. It will take you days to recover—and by then, we will be through the mountains and to the dragons’ lair.”

You will rot first and serve as worm fodder when I am finished with your form! she screeched within his head. As she thrust both of her hands toward him, Rhyden sat up, jerking the anam’cladh against his palm. The moment his fingers settled about the hilt, the blazing shaft of golden fire blazed above the tang, dazzling him, nearly blinding him.

He drew the sword before him and felt something heavy and strong slam against the blade. It struck with enough force to send Rhyden sprawling backwards onto his rump. Whatever she had hurled at him, whatever power the woman-spirit commanded against him, it deflected off of the anam’cladh’s blade and back at her. She screamed loudly, her voice ending abruptly as she was struck, knocked off of her feet and sent crashing into the forests, sailing beyond the nearest perimeter of trees.

Rhyden blinked, trembling and stunned. He could breathe again, though the effort ached him, and he winced, stumbling to his feet. He kept the anam’cladh between his fists; a quick glance at the blade revealed no signs of damage or weakening at all. It remained as bright and ablaze as the first moment he had touched it. He scanned the

tree line warily for any signs of movement, of the woman returning as he limped across the campsite to Temu's side.

He knelt next to the boy. "Temu?" he whispered, reaching down and pressing his hand against the boy's shoulder. Temu moaned softly and stirred, moving his hands.

"Hoah..." Rhyden gasped in relief. He released the anam'cladh, setting the hilt on the ground beside him. He put his arms around Temu, helping the dazed and frightened boy sit up.

"Rhyden?" Temu blinked at him.

"It is alright," Rhyden said softly, pressing his lips against Temu's brow. He drew Temu against his shoulder, holding him fiercely. "Hoah, thank the Good Mother you are alive. You are alright." He sat back, cradling Temu's face between his palms. "You are alright, are you not?" he asked, his eyes bright with worry. "Are you hurt?"

Temu shook his head, tears trailing down his cheeks. "I...I am alright..." he gasped, brushing his fingertips gently against Rhyden's face. "Oh, but...but Rhyden...you are hurt...!"

"It is nothing," Rhyden said, letting Temu fall against him, trembling. "Hush now. I am alright. Do not fret for it."

"You...you came for me..."

"I will always come for you," Rhyden said. "Always, Temu, by my breath, I swear it."

Temu looked up at him. "Rhyden, I..." he began, and then his eyes flew wide in bright, new terror. "Behind you—!" he cried out shrilly, jerking in panic.

Rhyden whirled, snatching the anam'cladh in hand. As Temu backpedaled from him, and he struggled to get his feet beneath him, he swung the searing blade before him, just in time for the woman to impale herself against the shaft of fire. She had come flying out of the woods, hurtling through the air like an eagle poised and swooping on an unsuspecting rabbit, her hands outstretched, her fingers hooked for Rhyden's throat.

The anam'cladh punched through her breast, skewering through her spine and out between her shoulder blades. She fell against Rhyden, knocking him clumsily, sending him sprawling onto his back. She landed atop him, sinking the blade all of the way to the tang in her chest.

She stared down at him, her black eyes wide with shock, her mouth agape, water dribbling in a thin rivulet from her lips and spattering against his face. She was close enough that he might have felt her breath against him, had she any to offer. She uttered a hoarse, gargled cry, her hands pawing, slapping lightly, feebly against his shoulders and then she dissolved into the air, her form fading into a pale, iridescent mist that waned and disappeared before his very eyes.

Rhyden lay against the ground, the sword still clutched in his hands. He shuddered uncontrollably, his breath hitching in his throat. "Mathair...Mathair Maith...!"

"Rhyden!" Temu cried out, scrambling toward him. He fell against Rhyden, throwing his arms around his neck and burrowing his forehead against Rhyden's throat as Rhyden let the anam'cladh drop from his trembling fingers.

"Mathair Maith," Rhyden whispered, wrapping his arms around Temu. The boy was sobbing, his tears punctuated by fervent, breathless mewls, and Rhyden sat up, holding him closely.

“She...she is gone,” he breathed. Temu’s hat had fallen off, and Rhyden stroked his hand against his hair. “It is alright, Temu. She is gone now. It...please...please do not cry. It is alright.”

The two of them sat there for a long time, clutching at one another, shivering together. At last, Rhyden stood, taking the anam’cladh hilt and tucking it into the bogcu pouch on his sash. Temu stood beside him, trembling like a lost, despondent lamb, and Rhyden reached for him, brushing his fingertips against Temu’s face. “Come here,” he whispered, and he let Temu wrap his arms around his neck. He stooped slightly, and lifted the boy in his arms. Temu was probably too old and too heavy to be carried in such fashion, but Rhyden did not care. Any maturity had been shocked and stricken from the boy; Temu huddled against him like a distraught youngster, and Rhyden wrapped his arms around him, balancing him against his hip and ignoring the pain Temu’s weight stoked in his injured ribs as the boy hooked his legs about Rhyden’s waist.

When Rhyden had been hurt in the tunnels during the Second War, when Trejaeran had died, and he had been left alone in the caves, his father had found him, carried him out from beneath the mountains. He and Eisos had not been close over the last five years; until this last trip to Belgaeran, in fact, Rhyden had fairly well despised his father since learning of Eisos’ part in the hiding of the Book of Shadows from him. Even still, Rhyden remembered the sensation of fading in and out of consciousness as Eisos carried him from the caves, the comfort he had found from his pain and terror that came with realizing he was with his father, that Eisos cradled him in his arms and whispered softly, kindly to him.

“It is alright,” he whispered, pressing his cheek against Temu’s temple just as Eisos had done for him. “Ta me libh, Temu. Ni eagleann tu. Ta me anseo.” *I am with you. Do not be frightened. I am here.*

Chapter Three

In the mortal plane, the events within the jabsar occurred in less time than it took to draw in a full breath and release it. As Mongoljin attacked Yeb and Temu's amis and Rhyden hurried to their aid, Jelmei and Nakhu, the two Oirat sentries turned to one another. Jelmei lifted his chin to speak quietly against Nakhu's ear as they watched Yeb and Temu gaze at the fire. Jelmei's father was a shaman under Yeb, and he meant to tell Nakhu that the two were embarking on a qaraq journey, a spiritual visit to the jabsar.

As Rhyden fought Mongoljin, as he crumpled onto the ground and clutched at his heart, his breath strangled beneath his chest, Aigiarn shifted slightly, sighing in her sleep, her fingers tightening unconsciously against Rhyden's. Nearby, Toghrul stirred, his hand moving slowly, feeling the empty space beneath the canopy before him where Temu had been sleeping. He groaned softly, rousing, curious about Temu's absence.

All at once, Rhyden sat up from beside the fire, jerking his hand away from Aigiarn's, his eyes flown wide. "Temu!"

At that precise moment, Yeb's body convulsed, his arms and legs folding abruptly toward his chest. He pitched sideways, falling over, and lay against the ground, twitching spasmodically, a low, gurgling sound uttering from his throat.

Temu thrashed, his head jerking toward the sky, his hands darting for his throat. His face infused with sudden, bright color as he whooped in a loud, desperate mouthful of air, choking.

The pine bough that Mongoljin had sent crashing down on Rhyden in the jabsar toppled in the mortal plane, rushing down from the tree top with a sudden, terrific clamor. It slammed against the ground, startling the Oirat awake beneath the lean-tos.

Aigiarn sat up, frightened and bewildered. When the tree limb hit the ground, she jumped, crying out softly, sharply, whipping her head toward the sound. Toghrul awoke in full, as well, and was immediately on his feet, his hand darting for his scimitar. He stumbled, nearly falling over the other Kelet around him as he rushed from beneath the canopy, his eyes wide with alarm, his blade hissing against his scabbard as he drew it out.

“Temu!” Rhyden exclaimed again, drawing himself onto his knees and scrambling for the boy.

“What is it?” Aigiarn cried, frightened. She saw her son, watched him hook his fingers against his throat and pant for breath. She panicked, scuttling toward him on her knees, her hands outstretched. “What is wrong? Temu—what is wrong?”

Rhyden lay his hands against Temu’s shoulders, and the boy opened his eyes. He blinked at Rhyden, and then at Aigiarn as she snatched hold of his sleeve, drawing him against her in a frantic embrace. “Rhyden?” he whispered, his eyes flooding with sudden tears. “Mamma...?”

He pulled away from Aigiarn and fell against Rhyden, throwing his arms around the Elf’s neck. He shuddered against Rhyden and began to sob.

“Hoah, Temu...” Rhyden whispered, enfolding him in his arms, holding him tightly. He cupped his hand against the back of Temu’s head and rocked him in his arms. “It is alright. It is alright now.”

“What has happened?” Aigiarn cried, reaching for her son again. She stared at Rhyden, wide-eyed and alarmed. “What is it? Is he hurt?”

“What is going on?” Toghrul demanded, stomping toward the fire, his scimitar still poised between his fists. He heard Temu’s weeping and his footsteps faltered, his expression growing bewildered and worried. “Temu—ko’un, what is it? What is wrong?”

He fell onto his knees beside Rhyden, and threw his sword aside, reaching for the boy. “Get your hands off of him,” he snapped at Rhyden, drawing Temu away. Temu was inconsolable, and crumpled against Toghrul’s chest, his breath hiccupping from his tears. Aigiarn folded herself over him, drawing her arms about her son and Toghrul, and Toghrul glared at Rhyden, confused and enraged as he wrapped his arms around Aigiarn.

“What have you done?” he said, and Rhyden blinked at him, startled. “What did you do to him, Elf?”

“He did not do anything to him, Toghrul,” Aigiarn said, her brows drawing as she looked up at him. “What is the matter with you? Rhyden was sleeping by the fire. He did nothing.”

“Bugu Yub!” Jelmei cried, kneeling beside the fallen shaman. He rolled Yeb onto his back and turned to Aigiarn and Toghrul, his eyes wide and frightened. “Something has happened to him!”

“Yeb!” Rhyden gasped, standing, rushing around the edge of the fire.

“Do not touch him!” Toghrul shouted, angrily at Rhyden, but Rhyden paid him no mind. There was no time for Toghrul’s petulance; something had indeed happened to Yeb

She hurt Yeb! She sent him into the qarang'qui!

and Rhyden did not know if Trejaeran had been able to help him or not. He knelt beside Yeb and leaned down, cradling the shaman's face between his palms. Yeb's eyes were closed and he did not stir at Rhyden's touch. A thin line of saliva trailed from the corner of his mouth, following the contour of his cheek.

"Yeb," Rhyden whispered, stroking his hand against Yeb's face. "Yeb, are you alright?"

Can you hear me, Yeb? he thought. *Please, Yeb, please. Can you hear me? I am here—I am with you. Come back to me. Come back to Temu.*

"She...she hurt him..." he heard Temu say from behind him. The boy grunted softly as he struggled to free himself from his mother's and Toghrul's embraces. "Let go of me—let me go to Yeb! She hurt him! She sent him into the qarang'qui!"

"Who?" Aigiarn asked, as Temu shrugged himself away from her. He scrambled to his feet, and broke away as Toghrul reached for him, grabbing for the hem of his del. He scampered over to Rhyden and Yeb, kneeling beside Rhyden.

"Is he alright?" Temu looked at Rhyden.

"I do not know, Temu," Rhyden said softly. He opened his mind to Yeb, straining his sight to sense any semblance of Yeb's presence, his cognizance within him.

"Temu, who hurt bugu Yeb?" Aigiarn cried, completely baffled and more than a little frightened. She rose to her feet, marching after her son. "Answer me. Who hurt bugu Yeb?"

"What happened here?" Toghrul demanded of Nakhu and Jelmei, both of whom blinked at him in stricken confusion.

“I...I do not know, bahadur,” Jelmei stammered. “They...bugu Yeb and Temu knelt by the fire. Bugu Yeb was going to perform qaraq...they had only begun when the...the Elf sat up, crying out just now. Bugu Yeb fell over, and Temu choked. I...I do not know what happened.”

“What?” Rhyden looked at Jelmei, his eyes wide with shock. “What are you talking about? There was a woman here—a bloody damn spirit the Khahl sent! She attacked Yeb and Temu! She attacked me! We fought her for at least twenty minutes! You were sitting right there—the both of you! How could you not have seen us?”

“It was in the jabsar, Rhyden,” Temu said quietly, draping his hand against Rhyden’s wrist. “They could not see it. They did not even know we were gone.”

“What—?” Aigiarn gasped, staggering. “A spirit attacked you?”

“What were you doing in the jabsar, ko’un?” Toghrul asked, his brows furrowed. “That is a place for shamans—not for little boys.”

“I have hiimori, too, Toghrul,” Temu said, turning to look over his shoulder. “Yeb said I could go. He drew a jaqa line around the camp and gave me my own toli to protect me. He did not know the Khahl had summoned a gazriin ezen. He said Ogotai asked to meet him there.”

“A...a gazriin ezen?” Aigiarn said, horrified. She knelt beside her son, trying to draw him against her, but he wriggled, shrugging his shoulders against her grasp.

“I am fine, Mamma—stop it,” he said. “Rhyden and Yeb are hurt, not me. They...they saved me. They both saved me.”

Aigiarn looked at Rhyden, and gasped again, reaching for him. “Rhyden, your head...! You are bleeding...!”

“I am alright,” he told her. Her eyes were wide and filled with anxious worry. It had been a long time since a woman had looked at him with such tender emotion apparent in her regard, and he remembered what Trejaeran had told him:

She might hold your heart, if you would let her.

“I am alright, Aigiarn,” he said again, catching her hand against his face, holding it gently, briefly. “Do not fret for it. Yeb is hurt, though. It...the spirit did something to him. Let me try to reach him.”

She nodded, drawing her hand away from his as he turned his attention back to the shaman. *Yeb, please, he thought. Please, if you can hear me, give answer. Come back to us.*

I...I can hear you, Rhyden, Yeb said softly, weakly. Rhyden felt his presence, like the hint of dim lamplight against the shadows of nightfall seeping from a distant window. Yeb moved, turning his face. His brows lifted, and he groaned.

“Yeb!” Temu cried.

Yeb’s eyelids fluttered open and he blinked dazedly at Rhyden. His breath escaped him in a feeble sigh, and Rhyden smiled. “Hoah, Yeb, you gave me a fright,” he said. “Welcome back.”

“I...I gave myself a fright,” Yeb whispered. He looked at Rhyden for a long moment. “You are bleeding.”

“It is nothing.”

“Not...not supposed to bleed...” Yeb said, his brows furrowing slightly as though this troubled him. “Not in the jabsar.”

“Can you sit up?” Rhyden asked. Yeb clasped Rhyden’s hand, curling his fingers against his palm.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “I...I think so...”

Rhyden leaned back, settling his other hand against Yeb’s shoulder. Temu helped by wrapping his arm around Yeb’s shoulders as he started to move, and together, they were able to ease Yeb into a seated posture.

“Yeb, are you alright?” Aigiarn asked, worried.

He smiled at her. “Yes. I...I am a little dazed yet, and weak, but I shall survive.” He turned to Temu, and his smile broadened as the boy hugged him fiercely, wrapping his arms around the shaman’s neck.

“I...I thought you were gone...!” Temu said, trembling against Yeb as he struggled not to cry again. “I thought you were lost in the qarang’qui.”

“And I might have been,” Yeb said, turning his cheek and kissing Temu’s ear. “Had it not been for Rhyden’s endur, Trejaeran Muirel.” Temu blinked at him in wonder, and Yeb smiled, turning to Rhyden. “At last, I have had opportunity for proper introduction to your friend.”

“He found you,” Rhyden said.

Yeb nodded. “And he brought me back from the qarang’qui—the place of eternal darkness Mongoljin sent me.”

“Mongoljin?” Aigiarn flinched as though she had been slapped.

Yeb looked at her and nodded grimly. “The Khahl have summoned a very powerful spirit to use against us—one who can match the strength of Rhyden’s endur; one who has a great interest in seeing Temu fail in his quest. Mongoljin Buriigitu,

Borjigidal's qatun and Duua's mother. The mother of the Khahl—the one who murdered Ag'iamon."

"Tengri have mercy," Aigiarn whispered, stricken.

"She has long been said to dwell in Tengriss Lake," Yeb said. "She has slept there for millennia—imprisoned within the waters for Ag'iamon's death. The Khahl must have recited powerful rituals to wake her. They must have channeled her into one of their forms to free her."

"And you fought her," Aigiarn said. She stared between Yeb and Rhyden, incredulous. "Both of you...you saved Temu from her...you fought a gazriin ezen."

"Rhyden defeated it, Mamma!" Temu said, and Aigiarn blinked at Rhyden, her eyes widening anew. Toghrul jerked, his mouth falling agape as he stared at Rhyden, stunned, and all of the Oirat turned at Temu's voice, their anxious voices falling silent.

Temu beamed at Yeb, oblivious to everyone's startlement. "You should have seen it, Yeb!" he said, grinning, his tears forgotten. "Rhyden fought her—he fought her with his hands, his feet. He did not even use hiimori or buyu against her!"

"Temu, do not..." Rhyden began, somewhat abashed, wanting to explain to Yeb and Aigiarn that he did not know how to use hiimori or buyu in fighting on any plane of existence, mortal or otherwise.

"She tried to knock a tree down on him," Temu continued, his words rolling out of his mouth in an eager, excited rush. "And he kicked her in the head, and then he called her a bitch and drew a flaming sword from the ground. He stabbed her with it and she turned into smoke! He defeated her! You should have seen it!"

“I wish that I had, Temu,” Yeb said quietly, his mouth unfolding as he looked at Rhyden in wonder.

“A flaming sword?” Toghrul stared at Rhyden, his expression caught between stunned incredulity and absolute disbelief. “What sort of buyu is this?”

“Elf buyu,” Temu said, turning to Rhyden, his eyes bright and marveling. “That is it, is it not, Rhyden? It was some kind of Elf buyu!”

“Elf buyu we have never seen before,” Toghrul said, frowning. “Elf buyu he must have kept hidden from us, secret and to himself.”

“It is called an anam’cladh.” Rhyden looked at Toghrul over his shoulder, raising his brow. “And you have never seen it before because I did not have it until tonight.” He rose to his feet, dipping his hand inside of his bogcu. He half-expected that the sword would be gone, that it had disappeared, no more than a vision within his mind and the jabsar, but he felt the silver hilt still tucked within the pouch. He hooked it against his fingertips, careful not to close his hand about it as he pulled it out.

“What sort of sword is that?” Toghrul asked, with a dubious snort while Aigiarn, Yeb, Temu and the other Oirat all peered curiously, hesitantly at the anam’cladh hilt. “There is no flaming blade. It does not have a blade at all.”

“Because we are not in the jabsar anymore, Toghrul,” Temu said patiently. “Maybe you can only see it in the jabsar, like our amis. I saw it there—it was on fire. Golden fire.”

“Maybe piercing the gazriin ezen’s heart broke it somehow,” Jelmei murmured, rising onto his tiptoes to look over Rhyden’s shoulder at the hilt.

Rhyden curled his fingers around the slender grip. As his fingertips met his thumb, as his fist closed, the spear of golden fire appeared, a lance of brilliant light aglow above the tang. The Oirat all recoiled, uttering frightened yelps. Yeb and Aigiarn jumped in start, turning their heads and squinting against the sudden glare while Toghral shrank, his hand reaching instinctively for his hip, for the scimitar he had dropped in the grass to hold Temu. Only Temu seemed unafraid of the blade; he grinned broadly in delight.

“Tengeriin boshig!” Toghrol cried out, stumbling, his eyes flown wide. “Tere ayu magu buyu!” *It is evil magic!*

“It is called an anam’cladh,” Rhyden said again. “It means *sword of the soul*. It is an ancient weapon, forged and enchanted by the first race of beings in the Bith—the Na’Siogai.”

“It deflected buyu like a toli, Yeb,” Temu said.

Rhyden turned to Aigiarn and Yeb. “I have not kept this hidden from you. Trejaeran gave it to me in a dream tonight. It belonged to him when he was alive. He told me he wanted me to have it, to protect me if he could not. He sensed the gazriin ezen coming—he said he had a sense of something unfamiliar and strong all evening, just like Ogotai.” He looked at Yeb, his eyes filled with worry. “He left me to go and find you. Is he...?”

“He is alright.” Yeb stood slowly, wincing slightly, and smiled kindly at the Elf. “He said you would worry for him, and asked me to tell you not to. It took much of his strength to defy the qarang’qui, to draw me from its dark embrace—strength that waned already in him, thanks to the Khahl shamans. He said he needed to rest, and recover.

Ogotai is with him. He will remain with Trejaeran, protect him until his strength has returned. Trejaeran said he had given you something that would keep you safe until then. I suppose he meant this.”

Yeb nodded toward the anam’cladh, his eyes round and wondrous on the sword. “Would it work for me?”

“I think so,” Rhyden said. “I...I am not sure. I did not know it would work for me until tonight. Would you like to see it, Yeb?”

Yeb blinked at him, bright hope in his eyes, like a small boy whose father just offered to let him hold his blade for the first time. “May I?”

“Yeb, do not,” Toghrul said. “It might be dangerous.”

“What is dangerous, bahadur, is your persistent doubt,” Yeb said, with a frown. Toghrul faltered in his steps, his brows drawn, his lips pressing together in a thin, surly line. Rhyden loosened his grip against the hilt as Yeb curled his hand about it. As it passed between their hands, the golden fire winked out, fluttering, to be replaced by bright, scarlet fire, a beam of vermillion light.

“Tengeriin boshig,” Yeb said, smiling, his eyes widening all the more. He glanced at Aigiarn and Temu, who had risen to their feet and come to stand nearby, both of them breathless with amazement. One by one, the other Oirat forgot their fears and crowded around, murmuring quietly to one another in curious fascination.

“It is red, like your gerel in the jabsar, Yeb,” Temu said. He looked at Rhyden and smiled. “And Rhyden’s was golden—just like his gerel.”

“Gerel is the light of one’s hiimori within them,” Yeb explained to Rhyden. “We see it as an aura, surrounding those with the shaman’s gift when our amis gather at the

jabsar. Perhaps your anam'cladh responds to a soul's hiimori, casts it as a powerful totem, a blade."

"Did it destroy the gazriin ezen when you ran it through, Rhyden?" Aigiarn asked.

"I do not know," Rhyden said, glancing uncertainly at Yeb. "She grew weak. Fighting Yeb must have sapped her strength, and then facing me...Trejaeran said without a physical form, his spirit weakens quickly. Hers must have as well. She disappeared when the blade went through her, but I do not know if I wielded it at full power or not."

He knew it took a pure heart to wield the anam'cladh with enough strength to kill a Na'Siogai. Qynh had been the one to use it, striking Ciardha's heart and running her through to end the First Shadow War, because Trejaeran had tasted of the duchan; his heart had no longer been pure enough to command the anam'cladh to its fullest capability.

And I do not know that mine is, either, Rhyden thought. He doubted any rational definition might qualify his heart as pure, no matter what Trejaeran might have offered to the contrary. He looked at Yeb, ashamed and abashed.

"I do not think I destroyed her," he said. "I think the blade only sent her away, back where she came from. She will rest there, like Trejaeran is—and she will return all the stronger."

"You sent her away, Rhyden," Yeb told him, as though he could sense Rhyden's disconcertion, his remorse. He pressed the anam'cladh hilt between Rhyden's hands, his fingers pressing gently against Rhyden's as the blade yielded from scarlet to gold.

“You saved Temu, and you survived to remain among us. That is all that matters, and we are grateful for it.”

“Yes,” Aigiarn said, drawing Rhyden’s gaze. She smiled at him, blinking against tears as she reached up, pressing her palm against his cheek, drawing his own smile. “So grateful, Rhyden.”

There was no more rest to be found that night at the Oirat encampment. They gathered together their supplies, striking the lean-tos and bundling blankets and furs together in tight rolls to carry with them back to the boat. The sun was just beginning to rise, a soft, rose-colored glow along the horizon, and they were keeping anxious watch on the water to see if the Uru’ut arrived safely.

Yeb had mixed together a blend of dried herbs he carried with him, along with bark and lichens he found in the forest around them and had ground into a loose powder between two stones. He steeped these in water heated over the fire and swallowed a generous cupful of the infusion. He instructed both Temu and Rhyden to drink it, as well; the three of them were aching, and the medicine helped assuage their pain.

“Any signs of the Uru’ut?” Rhyden asked, wincing and sucking in a sharp breath as Yeb dabbed some sort of ointment on his wounded forehead. *Lingqua’ebesun pulp*, the shaman called it, to help soothe the pain and prevent infection. The Oirat understood the basics of injury treatment and their healing methods and medicines were strikingly similar to those practiced by traditional Elfin healers, like Rhyden’s mother. Unlike the Elves, these healing techniques were not confined to only one sect

or aicmeach and all of the Oirat, even Temu, seemed familiar with them. Rhyden thought the Torachans could learn a thing or two from the Oirat. In the empire, healing standards were grossly inadequate, the techniques barbaric and often ignorant. Healers were often little more than charlatans peddling ineffective tonics and poultices, or worse, barber-surgeons who performed crude surgeries and rudimentary dentistry in squalid conditions with little benefit of any semblance of anesthetic. More than anything else, this had inspired Rhyden to learn as much as he could about his mother's Banaltra healing methods while he lived in the empire.

"No," Yeb said. "But they will call to us if they approach. We have signals, bird cries we exchange to know one another from afar."

The events of the night had exhausted Temu. He had tried very hard not to droop or doze, but he had curled on his side next to Rhyden a short time ago and promptly fell fast asleep, the cap of his head resting against Rhyden's hip. Rhyden glanced down at the boy as Yeb dabbed his fingertips again in the ointment. Rhyden brushed the cuff of his fingers lightly against Temu's cheek, smiling softly at the boy.

Temu had not left his side since awaking from the jabsar. Not even Aigiarn had been able to pry him away. She did not seem troubled by this; in fact, on several occasions over the last hour, Rhyden had found her regarding him and her son with a fond softness in her face, a tender expression lifting her brows, the corners of her mouth in a faint smile. If Rhyden would happen to attract her gaze, Aigiarn's smile would widen all the more.

While the other Oirat had begun to trundle supplies down to the knarr, Toghrul had drawn Aigiarn aside. They had stood together in quiet conversation for some time

now beneath some nearby pine trees, draped in the shadows of the new morning beneath the heavy boughs. Rhyden tried not to watch them, and made conscientious effort not to overhear, fixing his attention on Yeb, and talking to the shaman. His eyes kept wandering, however, trailing over to the trees, to Aigiarn. At first, her posture seemed to suggest whatever ToghruI told her aggravated her; she stood stiffly, with her arms folded against her bosom, her chin lifted at a stubborn, nearly petulant angle. After awhile, her stance loosened, and she and ToghruI drew closer together. When ToghruI cupped his hands against her face, speaking to her softly, Rhyden looked away, blinking down at his lap, feeling intrusive.

He did not even notice that Yeb had fallen silent, watching him watch Aigiarn for a long moment. When it occurred to him that Yeb had not said anything, he glanced up and felt abashed color stoking in his cheeks to find the shaman regarding him quietly, his expression kind.

“Sorry,” Rhyden murmured, lowering his eyes again. “I...what were you saying, Yeb?”

“She is an extraordinary woman,” Yeb said.

“Aigiarn? Yes, she...she seems that sort.”

“ToghruI has tried very hard, for many long years to take Yesugei’s place in her heart,” Yeb said. “And Aigiarn has tried very hard to let him.”

Rhyden nodded, studying the inseam of his leggings, the stitching joining the panels of hide encircling his right thigh.

“But there are some things you cannot force upon your heart, no matter how much like logic it might seem within your mind,” Yeb remarked, drawing Rhyden’s gaze.

“She does not speak much of him,” Rhyden said. “Yesugei, I mean.”

“You do not speak much of Trejaeran, your past with him,” Yeb said in gentle observation. “Perhaps some memories are best left private, some pain too poignant, even after the passing of time, to speak of.”

Rhyden blinked at him, and then looked down at his lap again, uncertain what to say.

“Yesugei died shortly after Temu was born,” Yeb said.

“Yes.” Rhyden nodded.

“That is a long time to carry that sort of burden on one’s heart,” Yeb said, and though he looked toward Aigiarn, Rhyden knew he was speaking about him, as well. He had told Yeb in guarded detail of Trejaeran’s death fifteen years earlier.

“I knew Yesugei Bokeagha,” Yeb said. “We grew up together and he was very dear to me. When my father died, when he returned from the quest into the Khar Yesugei had sent him on, Yesugei was filled with such sorrow and remorse. It was not his fault, what happened to my father, but he felt terrible culpability for it. I think even now that we know bugu Inalchuk’s sacrifice was part of destiny’s plan, that he was meant to give us the map for you to read, Yesugei would have yet felt responsible, and broken for it.

“Yesugei was a good man,” Yeb said, and he smiled at Rhyden. “One you would have liked, I think, as I am sure he would have liked you. He was a lot like you, you know.”

“Me?” Rhyden said. He laughed softly. “Poor man.”

Yeb smiled again. “He was very brave, and very kind. And very hard on himself for circumstances he could never hope to control. He loved Aigiarn, treasured her. He told me once that he would sometimes lie awake the whole night through, just to watch her sleep beside him, to feel her breath against his face. He could be very hard—his life had hardened him, as it has hardened Toghrul, and most among our people. But with her, with Aigiarn, Yesugei was always so tender. He could look across the room and see her, and it would come upon his face, this gentle softness, as though she held the keys to his very soul. As though she set him free.”

Rhyden looked at Aigiarn as Yeb spoke. Toghrul still held her face between his hands; he had turned so that his back was to Rhyden, but he could still see Aigiarn beyond Toghrul’s shoulder. She met Rhyden’s gaze and he felt his breath slow beneath his chest. When Toghrul leaned forward, turning Aigiarn’s face to meet his, offering a kiss, she did not avert his eyes from Rhyden. She canted her head, turning away from Toghrul’s kiss; his lips brushed against her cheek and she leaned against his shoulder in an embrace, all the while looking at Rhyden.

“She loved him just as much,” Yeb said. “She was so young when they married, and she gave her heart to him fully, without hesitation. You could see it in her eyes, her smile, her entire face. He was a part of her, infused within her mind and heart. She was so broken when he died. I think if it had not been for Temu, she would have taken her own life to be with Yesugei. She was that devastated by his loss. For the longest time, she said she did not understand how she could draw breath without him.”

Rhyden looked at Aigiarn, holding her gaze over Toghrul’s shoulder as Toghrul turned his face, speaking against her ear. When Trejaeran had died, Rhyden had been

crippled with grief. While he had recuperated from his injuries, he had languished in bed, immobilized by his broken heart as much as his broken ankle. He had not wanted to eat. He had not wanted company. He had been so overwhelmed with sorrow and regret that he had simply wanted to die. In the years since, though that mask of initial shock had lifted from him, there were many times when Rhyden felt like he just went through the motions of his day-to-day life; that whatever joy or pleasure he might have once found in things seemed pale to him now, tempered.

Aigiarn smiled at Rhyden. He smiled back, helpless against her.

She might hold your heart, if you would let her, Trejaeran had said.

“Toghrul loves her,” Rhyden said quietly, as Aigiarn stepped away from Toghrul, turning her eyes away from Rhyden. Toghrul said something that must have pleased or amused her; her smile widened slightly, and she laughed. *Toghrul loves her,* he told himself. *She would no more be mine to give my heart to than Qynh.*

“Yes, he does,” Yeb said, drawing Rhyden’s gaze. “But Aigiarn’s heart is not for him to decide.”

He brought a small square of woven wool toward Rhyden’s face, pressing it against the wound on his brow. Rhyden flinched, drawing in a sharp breath between his teeth. “I am sorry,” Yeb said softly.

“It is alright,” Rhyden said, glancing at him and smiling. “It will be healed and gone in a few days. Do not worry.”

“This wound should not be here,” Yeb said, his expression troubled. “The pain should be, but not wounds. Temu said you bled in the jabsar. That is not supposed to happen.”

Rhyden settled his fingertips against the wool, holding it in place as Yeb drew his hand away. "I must just be lucky, I guess."

"It took more than good fortune to dispel the gazriin ezen of Mongoljin Burilgitu," Yeb told him.

"I think she will be back," Rhyden said. "I am sorry, Yeb. Trejaeran gave me the anam'cladh, but I do not understand how to use it, how to call its powers in full. Trejaeran knows, but I do not. It is his sword."

"He gave it to you, Rhyden," Yeb reminded. "And you called its powers enough to send Mongoljin away. It would seem to me it is your sword now."

Rhyden smiled at him.

"Let her come back." Yeb patted Rhyden fondly on the shoulder and then stood. He moved slowly, his brows lifting as he winced, and he pressed his hand against the small of his back. "She caught us by surprise this time. She will not have that advantage again."

"Bahadur! Bahadur!" one of the Kelet, a young man named Sacha cried, rushing through the trees toward the campsite. Yeb and Rhyden turned at his cry, as did Toghrul and Aigiarn.

"Yagun ayu tere, Sacha?" Toghrul asked as he and Aigiarn walked briskly out from beneath the trees to meet the Oirat. *What is it?*

"Two knarrs approach from the east," Sacha told him. "We have heard two sharp cries of the *shria'sibagu* from out upon the water, and we have answered."

Toghrul turned to Aigiarn, his face bright with sudden hope. "It is Juchin," he said. "The visions must have been wrong—the Uru'ut survive. It Juchin. He has come."

“Tengri magtaqu,” Aigiarn said, grinning broadly. *Tengri be praised.*

“Keep here with Temu,” Toghrul said, placing his hand on her shoulder. When her brows drew together, and she drew in breath to snap, he held up his other palm to stay her voice. “Just until they draw near enough to shore to be certain, Aigiarn. They know the sibagu signal, but it could yet be a Khahl trick.”

“You are right,” she said, still frowning as she shrugged his hand away from her. “They have played enough tricks on us already. We cannot take such a risk.”

“I will call to you if it is safe,” Toghrul promised her. He was already moving, clapping Sacha on the shoulder as the two of them hurried for the beach.

“Juchin! Sain bainuu!” Toghrul called out in greeting as the first of the two Uru’ut knarrs ran aground on the shores of Tolui Bay. The thick keel of the boat cleaved a deep trench in the soft mud, and the knarr listed to its left, rolling to a gentle stop along the broad curve of its portside hull. He could see the Uru’ut noyan, or chieftain, Juchin Batuqan standing at the bow of the vessel, one gutal propped upon the slat beam of a rowing bench, his gloved hand draped against the pommel of his scimitar.

“Ba ci, Toghrul,” Juchin called back. *And to you.* Like others of his tribe, fifty-two-year old Juchin was a relatively short man, almost a half-head shorter than Toghrul. The Uru’ut were a distinctive sub-clan of the Oirat, a breed of stocky, muscular people with thick torsos and strong limbs. Juchin had large hands and wide shoulders. His broad, long face was weathered like aged, worn hide, marred with a dark, crooked scar that wrapped from his left temple down to his chin.

The Uru'ut were the smallest of the four Oirat tribes, but also the fiercest. They preferred to live almost year-round within the foothills of the Khar, unlike the other tribes who scattered widely throughout the steppe plains toward Ebesun and Ordos. The Uru'ut were seafarers and warriors. While Toghrul's primary purpose in leading his own Kerait tribe, and in serving all of the Oirat, was keeping them alive, seeing them through drought and winter, clothed and fed, sheltered from the Khahl, Juchin had always served a more single-minded purpose. He was dedicated to Temuchin, and to the fulfillment of his destiny as the Negh. Almost from the moment of Temu's birth, Juchin had committed his life—and the lives of his people—to this. He was as fixed upon their triumph as Aigiarn, and like Aigiarn, Juchin was willing to take extraordinary risks to see Temu succeed.

Toghrul did not always agree with either of them. As stubborn and unyielding as Aigiarn could be, Juchin was even more so. Unlike Aigiarn, Juchin was not afraid to sacrifice himself, or his people to see Temu to his destiny. Toghrul found this willingness, this unwavering, dogged resolve both admirable and disturbing.

Juchin hopped nimbly over the side of his knarr, letting his feet settle in the soft mud of the beach. He walked toward Toghrul while the second longboat ran aground alongside of the first.

"Tengeriin boshig, you have arrived," Toghrul said, as the two men clapped each other on the shoulders. His relief was apparent enough in his face to spark Juchin's curiosity, and Juchin looked at him, his brow arched.

"Why would we not?" he asked. "My Khanum sends word for me to leave at once, and I leave at once."

“We thought something might have happened, that you had met with trouble,” Toghrul said. “Yeb had a vision of ravens that troubled him, and we thought—”

“Yes, my idugan, Baichu has seen them, too,” Juchin said, his brows narrowing. “She thinks it is the Khahl, that they are aware of our intentions.”

“Temu saw them at the aysil at Qoyina,” Aigiarn said from behind Toghrul, drawing Juchin’s gaze. He smiled broadly, the leathery scrap of his scar crimping about the dimples in his cheek as he watched her approach.

“Sain bainuu, minu Khanum,” he said.

“Sain bainuu, bahadur Juchin,” Aigiarn said, exchanging shoulder-claps with Juchin as firmly and capably as any man. “We were worried. We thought the Minghan had attacked the aysil.”

“Not before we left,” Juchin said. “And if they tried afterward, we still had more than one hundred able to defend it. I have brought forty of my Kelet with me, and sent forty more by bergelmir to meet us at the Harw River in four weeks’ time.”

“Eighty?” Toghrul said, and he glanced at Aigiarn. “Juchin, that is nearly every able-bodied man in your tribe.”

“Over age fifteen, yes, bahadur, it is,” Juchin replied, turning to meet Toghrul’s gaze. “The aysil stands defended nonetheless. Do not worry for it.”

“More than one hundred, yes, you have said—these, your women, children and elders,” Toghrul said.

“They know how to fight,” Juchin said, lifting his chin. “There is not an Uru’ut who draws breath who cannot take a scimitar in hand and swing it.”

“Bugu Yeb and Temu saw hundreds of ravens,” Toghrul said, his expression growing stricken. “It could mean hundreds of Khahl, Juchin—”

“Then at least a hundred of them fell if they attacked my aysil,” Juchin said. “One for every woman, child and elder who waited there for them.”

The other Uru’ut disembarking from their boats had overheard this conversation. They listened with interest, and spoke quietly among themselves about it, though none of them seemed distraught by the grim tidings. They moved and murmured with a sort of detached resignation, as if Toghrul told them nothing they had not already anticipated.

“We have known of this,” Juchin told Toghrul and Aigiarn. “We were not gone many hours before we heard the screams echoing from a distance. Sound travels well upon the water, and they came to us just after dark.”

“You did not go back?” Toghrul asked, blinking at him, startled.

“To what purpose, bahadur?” Juchin asked. “Mine purpose—and that of every Oirat—lies here.”

“You might have saved your people,” Toghrul said.

Juchin met his gaze evenly. “I saved my people by continuing on. We have always understood the sacrifices that might be asked of us to see Temu reclaim the dragons. He is the Negh—Dobun’s heir, the chosen son of the Dologhon, the bearer of the sacred star marks. His destiny has been promised for five thousand years, his greatness whispered in the wind across our land when our great-ancestors were yet dreams within their mothers’ wombs.

“If those at the aysil were slain, they served their destinies as the Tengri saw fit, and they live on in the great spirit tree, beseeching buyan—blessings—for us. They have found glory, and will know the joy of rebirth into a land that is free—an Oirat people who are free, and who have achieved what has been long-promised for them. The Tengri suffer not the reward of the faithful to be lost. Those who have left us shall be with us in spirit and among us once more when our empire is restored. My people find comfort in this faith, bahadur. I hope that you would, as well.”

An old woman walked toward them, her gutals shuffling slowly in the mud. She had been helped from one of the knarrs by a younger woman, and both wore the yellow khurims of shamans lashed over their del. They both also bore the dark marks of slave catastas wrapped against their left cheeks and brows.

The older woman walked with her eyes squinted shut, her thin lips pressed together as though with great effort, keeping one of her spindly, gnarled hands outstretched to guide her.

“You remember my idugan, bugu Baichu Cherendai and her *oyutan* student, Nala Sahni?” Juchin asked, as the woman drew near.

“Yes, of course,” Aigiarn nodded. “Sain bainuu, bugu Baichu, and to you, Nala.”

“Sain bainuu, minu Khanum,” said the younger woman, Nala, lowering her face in polite deference to Aigiarn. She was remarkably beautiful, and not of Ulusian lineage. Though her hair was thick and dark, worn in a plait, like an Oirat woman’s, Nala’s skin was a darker, nearly bronze complexion. Her dark eyes, though almond-shaped, were larger, her nose longer and less wide, her mouth smaller, her lips less full.

The older woman lifted her chin at the sound of Aigiarn's voice. She sniffed the air, her brows pinching slightly, her eyes yet closed. "Sain bainuu, minu Khanum."

"This ground trembles beneath us," Nala said quietly, looking about uneasily.

Baichu nodded. "Spirits have passed this way recently, some good and some bad," she said. "Their gerels lingers behind them in the earth."

"Yes, bugu Baichu," Aigiarn said. "We have had some visitors of our own in the night."

"Bahadur Toghrul, your heart is troubled." Baichu turned, not opening her eyes. "You worry for reasons that are not yours to bear."

"Sain bainuu, bugu Baichu," Toghrul said, pressing her outstretched hand between his own, smiling at her. "Nala, it is good to see you both once more."

"And you, bahadur," Nala said, nodding again.

Juchin looked beyond Aigiarn's shoulder and he smiled again, broadly. "Here he is!" he exclaimed, stepping past Aigiarn and opening his arms.

"Juchin!" Temu cried, running down the beach. Juchin caught him in his arms, hoisting him off his feet, making the boy laugh. "Juchin! You are safe!" Temu said, as Juchin deposited him on the ground again. Temu's smile faltered as he met Juchin's gaze. "I was worried for you."

"All is well, and we are with you." Juchin planted his palm against Temu's cap, making him smile again. "What is this your Mamma tells us of visitors in the night? You have started the adventure without me, baga'ere?" he asked, calling Temu *little man*.

"A gazriin ezen attacked us," Temu said. "Me and Yeb, in the jabsar last night."

"A gazriin ezen?" Juchin turned in startled surprise to Aigiarn and Toghrul.

“Yes,” Aigiarn said grimly. “The Khahl have summoned the spirit of Mongoljin Burilgitu from Tengriss Lake.”

At these words, the old woman, Baichu’s hand fluttered to his breast, and she clutched at a small, silver toli that dangled about her neck. “Tengri ibegel bide,” she said breathlessly. *Tengri help us.*

“Rhyden saved us,” Temu said. “You should have seen it, Juchin. He kicked her in the head.”

“Rhyden...?” Juchin asked, raising his brow curiously. He looked toward Rhyden and Yeb as they approached from the campsite. “This must be the riddle you wrote to us of, Aigiarn.”

“Juchin, this is Rhyden Fabhcun,” Aigiarn said with a smile. “He is a Gaeilge Elf from Tiralainn, a land to the west, across the great sea. Rhyden, this is Juchin Batuqan, noyan of the Uru’ut.”

“Sain bainuu,” Rhyden said to Juchin, turning his gaze to the ground politely.

Juchin regarded Rhyden for a long moment without offering reply. At last, Rhyden glanced up uncertainly, looking between the Uru’ut noyan and Aigiarn. “He is tall,” Juchin said at length. “And pale.”

Aigiarn smiled again. “Yes, Juchin. He is our friend, as I told you in my letter.”

“Tere ayu managa degere Temuchin,” Baichu said, turning her face to Rhyden. “Managa degere Temuchin.” *He is a guardian to Temuchin.* She shrugged her arm away from Nala and trudged forward, her hands outstretched and groping. Juchin stepped politely aside, and Rhyden blinked at her, startled, as she patted her palms against his

chest. “Altan’nachin,” she murmured, smiling. *The golden falcon*. “Imu gerel—imu kucun—ayu masi cinga.” *His gerel—his power—is very strong*.

“Teyimu, bugu Baichu,” Yeb said to her. Yes. He noticed Rhyden’s discomfort with her attention, and smiled at him in reassurance. “This is bugu Baichu Cherendai,” he said. “An idugan—female shaman—of the Uru’ut. She is blind, and using her hiimori, her utha suld to see you. She was taken from us many years ago, sold into slavery.”

“I told my first master he would never have an heir,” Baichu said, reaching up and brushing her fingers against Rhyden’s face. “He punished me for my vision. He ordered my eyes burned out with branding irons. He thought it would keep me from seeing.” She shook her head and chuckled, as though she found this amusing. “He died two weeks later, robbed by thieves as he traveled to Galjin. They tied him to his carriage wheels and slit his neck to navel. He died childless, just as I promised. Sain bainuu, Yeb. Your gerel is weakened today and weary, and your toli is missing.”

“It was broken, bugu Baichu,” Yeb told her, smiling, lowering his head courteously. “And I have entrusted my other to Temu for our journey.”

Baichu’s hands moved from Rhyden’s face to his shoulders, and then down his chest toward his stomach. “That is good,” she said to Yeb. “It seems he will have need of it. I have another in Nala’s bogcu, if you would like. It is not as strong as yours, but it should serve.”

“You are kind, bugu Baichu,” Yeb told her, nodding again.

“Sayigan cirai,” Baichu said, turning her face first toward Yeb, and then over her shoulder as if addressing Aigiarn. She patted her hands lightly against Rhyden’s cheeks

as she spoke, clearly indicating she spoke about him. “Magu’jirug ugei abqu tere. Jalagu, cinga beye. Tere cidaqu ogku olan keuked.”

Aigiarn blinked at this, and as she glanced at Rhyden, she pressed her lips together, the corner of her mouth hooking as though she struggled to contain a smile or laughter.

“What?” Rhyden asked quietly, glancing between Yeb and Temu. “What did she say?”

“She said you have a beautiful face, Rhyden, that the bad painting—your tattoo—cannot take away,” Temu told him, smiling brightly. “And she said you have a young, strong body. She thinks you would give many children.”

“What?” Rhyden blinked, startled. At his reaction, Aigiarn could not help herself; her hand darted to her mouth as she burst out laughing. Juchin chuckled with her, shaking his head, while Toghrul glowered at Rhyden, his brows drawing narrow.

“Hoah,” Rhyden said, feeling color stoke in his cheeks. “Well...I...byarla, bugu Baichu.” *Thank you.* “That...that is kind of you...I think...”

“Bugu Baichu, you have shamed him,” Nala said quietly, leaning toward the older woman’s ear. “His customs are not our own.”

“What shame?” Baichu asked. “I tell him only what my hiimori shows to me. When I was a slave in Ebesun, imperial nobles used to travel for weeks—and spend plenty of silver—to learn of such things from me.”

“Bugu Baichu is an *ure’idugan*,” Yeb told Rhyden. “Her hiimori is especially attuned to the potential of childbearing and siring, and she has attended to more births among the Oirat than any other shaman.”

“I...then I am most honored for her counsel,” Rhyden said. “Sain bainuu, bugu Baichu. Byarla.”

“This is Nala Sahni, Baichu’s oyutan—her apprentice shaman,” Yeb said of the younger woman. “Nala, this is Rhyden Fabhcun.”

“Sain bainuu, Rhyden,” Nala said, with a cordial nod.

“Sain bainuu,” he said. He raised his brow at her, recognizing the heritage apparent in her countenance, her skin tone. “You are Galjin?”

“Yes,” Nala said, nodding again, her mouth unfolding in a smile. “From Kolhapur. Bugu Baichu and I served the same master for a time in Ebesun. Bahadurs Toghrul and Juchin freed us as our master brought us north to Sadiya in Ordos.”

“Five years ago,” Baichu said, smiling as she clapped one of Nala’s hands between her own. “I sensed the hiimori, the strength of her gerel even then. She never knew her parents, poor child. She is one of us now—a part of our tribe.”

“Bugu Yeb,” Nala said, her smile widening as she turned to the shaman. “Sain bainuu.”

“Sain bainuu, Nala,” Yeb said, meeting her gaze, nodding once to her. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, but he kept his eyes politely on the ground.

“We should leave,” Juchin said to Aigiarn. “If the Khahl were bold enough to attack the aysil, I would not be surprised if they did not try to follow us. We heard voices across the water last night, shortly after nightfall. They seemed to come from Sube, beyond the mouth of Tolui, and they might have come from Enghan...though Enghan do not venture much along their southern shores anymore. It might have been Minghan.”

“You are right,” Aigiarn said, her gaze turning out upon the water, her brows narrowing. “We will row south, following the shoreline to the Toda River. I want to take the boats down the Toda to the Urlug.”

Juchin blinked at her. “You do not mean to go by foot?”

“The Deguu Masiff ravine is nearly thirty miles long,” Aigiarn said. “We will make better time if we keep to the river.”

“We will be rowing the length of the Toda against the current,” Juchin said. “And from Koke Lake, where the mountain rivers drain, along a treacherous path by the Urlug. Those are swift waters and dangerous shores. Bad places to bring boats.”

“We will take them as far as we can,” she said. “The Khahl know we are moving, and they know why, Juchin. They are determined to stop us, and if they are following us, we need to move as quickly as we can.”

“Teyimu, Aigiarn,” Juchin said, nodding his chin in concession. Yes.

“Do you mean to bring bugu Baichu with us?” Toghrul asked in a low voice, catching Aigiarn by the sleeve of her del. He raised his brow at her. “This is no journey for a woman of her years, Aigiarn. Let some of my Kelet bring her back to Ulus, to our aysil in the Taiga. We can—”

“She means to go with us, Toghrul,” Juchin said, drawing the younger man’s gaze. “She insisted, as a matter of fact.”

“I pressed my hands against Aigiarn’s belly nine years ago and promised her time had come,” Baichu said to Toghrul. “And months after that, I promised her that Yesugei’s son grew in her womb—the sacred son of the Dologhon marks, Dobun’s

heir—the Negh lord. I have seen the beginning of this promised destiny, and I mean to be there for its ending.”

Baichu turned around and shuffled toward her knarr. Nala hurried after her, taking her by the arm and guiding her way. “I am blind, not deaf, bahadur,” Baichu said to Toghrul, slapping the back of her hand against the flat of Toghrul’s stomach as she passed him. “Old, not feeble. And I am coming with you.”

Juchin turned to call over his shoulder to his men. “You have heard the Khanum. We are taking to the water again, westward for Toda. Ta yagaraqu—qamug turgen!” *Hurry now—everyone!* He looked down at Temu and grinned as he clapped his palm against the boy’s pate. “We have dragons to find.”

Chapter Four

You should not have come, Yeb told Nala. His body sat on a narrow bench along the portside of one of the Uru'ut knarrs, his eyes upon the water as the Oirat rowed along the Lydian coast for the mouth of the Toda River. Yeb's mind, however, was someplace else, out in the jabsar once more, abandoning his form for awhile.

He could do this on his own for short measures of time without using any trance-inducing herbs or plants, like qola'nidu berries. He was an accomplished and powerful enough shaman to induce a brief journey of qaraqqu simply by drawing his breath to a slow, steady rhythm beneath his breast, by closing his eyes and letting himself—mind and form—become very still and very quiet.

The jabsar landscape that greeted him was a serene clearing among ancient, venerable sequoias. The ground his mind imagined beneath his feet was carpeted with a thick layer of golden, dried pine needles. He could see the young oyutan standing before him across the clearing, her hands folded together against the small of her back. She was smiling, the corners of her mouth unfurled ever-so slightly, her dark hair unfettered, lying over her shoulders, framing her face.

I could not have kept away, she said. *This is Temu's destiny and ours. He is the chosen son—He Who Shall Pass, Yeb. There is no place else I would be than here with the Negh.*

It is not safe here, he said to Nala. *And you are not ready yet for this.*

Would you rather I had remained at the aysil? she asked, raising one brow.
Waited for the Khahl to come?

He went to her. He was taller than she was, and Nala lifted her chin to meet his gaze. She was still smiling at him in wry, mischievous fashion, and he lifted his hand, brushing the cuff of his knuckles against her cheek.

“No,” he said, cradling her face against his palm. “I would rather you and Baichu go with some of the Kelet back to the Taiga, the Kerait aysil where it is safe.”

“Temuchin needs me,” she told him. “You need me, Yeb.”

“You are not ready for this.”

“You stand against the Khahl shaman council of thirteen,” Nala said. “And the gazriin ezen of Mongoljin Burilgitu. You need all of the buyu—all of the hiimori—you can get.”

He looked at her for a long moment, into her large, dark, eager eyes. He brushed the pad of his thumb against the high, delicate arch of her cheek. “Nala...” he began.

“You told me I am strong,” she said. “My hiimori is greater than Baichu’s, you said.”

“It is, but you are untrained in it, Nala. You do not know yet how to wield it well or wisely.”

“I wield it well enough,” she told him, her smile widening. She pressed her hands against his face and leaned toward him, lifting her chin, her mouth settling against his. The tip of her tongue delved between his lips. “I have missed you,” she whispered, drawing away, letting her nose brush against his. “And I have worried.”

“I know,” he said gently, stroking his hand against her hair.

“If you...if you had fallen into the qarang’qui...” Nala blinked at him, her brows lifted.

“I did not.”

“But you might have...”

“But I did not,” he said again, raising his chin and pressing his lips against her brow. “I felt my father there, in the qarang’qui. I could feel him with me.”

His father, Inalchuk’s ami had been banished to the eternal darkness of the qarang’qui when he had tried to channel the gazriin ezen of the Abhacan mage. Through Inalchuk’s body, the mage had drawn the cryptic map that would lead them to the dragons’ lair, and so Inalchuk’s sacrifice had been necessary in Temu’s destiny, but the loss of his father, and the realization of Inalchuk’s horrific fate had nearly broken Yeb. The Abhacan mage had not meant harm to Inalchuk; like any gazriin ezen spirit, it had simply proven too strong for Inalchuk to control once he had harnessed its energy. The laws of the Tegsh had applied in unflinching and seemingly cruel fashion; two amis could not inhabit the same form at once for any length of time, and whichever proved the weaker was the one doomed to the qarang’qui.

“I could not see him,” Yeb said to Nala. “There was nothing but darkness, but I could feel him all around me. His spirit was filled with such despair for me.”

“Oh, Yeb...” Nala whispered.

“When Trejaeran Muirel freed me, when he came to me, he used his power to free Father,” Yeb said. He looked down toward the toes of his gutal, his eyes swimming with sudden, unashamed tears. “He freed my father,” he whispered again. “At great cost to himself—great effort and exertion, he freed us both—my ami to return to my form, and my father’s to fly to the spirit tree, to find rebirth.”

“Trejaeran is Rhyden Fabhcun’s utha suld,” Nala said. “The endur that is bound to him?”

Yeb nodded. He looked up at her. “He is the most extraordinary being I have ever sensed. His hiimori is so vast, Nala, it pierced the qarang’qui like sunlight. I would not have believed such power was possible had I not witnessed it myself.” He smiled at her as a tear slipped down his cheek. “He freed my father.”

“Oh, Yeb,” she whispered again, drawing her arms about his neck, embracing him. She turned her face, kissing the shaved plane of his temple, the curve of his earlobe. She held him for a long moment as he trembled against her, tangling his hands in her hair. When at last he pulled away from her, she caressed her palm against his cheek.

“Is Rhyden Fabhcun that powerful, too?” she asked him softly.

“I do not know,” Yeb said. “I do not think even Rhyden knows. He defeated Mongoljin’s spirit, sent her away. I think there is more strength in his heart, his power than he is likely aware.”

“Toghrul does not trust him,” she said. Yeb’s brows drew slightly, and he huffed a soft snort of air through his nose. He turned and walked away, folding his arms across the chest of his khurim.

“I heard him talking with Juchin about it,” Nala said. The two traveled aboard separate knarrs; Nala went with Juchin, Baichu and Toghrul in the lead boat while Yeb rode with Aigiarn, Rhyden and Temu on another. “He said he thinks that Rhyden Fabhcun’s hiimori is as strong as you say it is—that he has cast some sort of buyu to

trick you, make you believe he is the golden falcon of prophecy. He said the Elf will betray Temu, and us all, and deliver the dragons to Targutai and the Khahl.”

“Toghrul’s reason has abandoned him, then,” Yeb said, frowning.

“He thinks the Elf has put a spell on Aigiarn to cloud her judgment,” Nala said, adding carefully: “And her heart.”

“Toghrul believes if nearly ten years of effort on his part could not win Aigiarn’s heart, then nothing short of buyu could,” Yeb said, snorting again. “There is the reason for his mistrust, Nala, and nothing more. He is jealous.”

“She does seem fond of the Elf,” Nala remarked. She walked slowly behind Yeb, kicking her gutal through the pine needles. “It does not take hiimori to sense it about her. I saw the way her face came aglow as he drew near on the beach. He brought a smile to her, the likes of which I have not seen in the years I have known her.”

“They are kindred souls,” Yeb said, not turning to look at her. “I have felt it from the first. There is something in the air when he draws near to her, like music, as though their spirits sing in harmony together. If Aigiarn softens to Rhyden, it is by her choosing, not his forcing. Toghrul should have realized and accepted long ago that Aigiarn’s heart did not lie with him.”

Nala stood behind him for a long, quiet moment. “As you have done?” she asked at length.

Yeb turned, his brow raised. “Yes.”

“If she was to love him,” Nala said. “If Aigiarn was to love Rhyden Fabhcun, it would not trouble you? Hurt you? How long have you loved her, Yeb? You told me once—from the day she arrived at the Naiman aysil as Yesugei’s promised bride-to-be.

You have loved her from the first moment you set eyes upon her. You have endured these years with Aigiarn as Toghrul's lover, because you found some respite in the fact that she did not give her heart to him. But now...? You have served her loyally, faithfully for years. The Elf has known her little more than weeks. If she was to love him...?"

"If Aigiarn was to love Rhyden, I would rejoice for it, Nala," he said. "I saw her in her years spent with Yesugei, too, not just these past with Toghrul. I saw the joy that bloomed in her face—her love for her husband. It is a radiance that was stripped from her, stolen by the Khahl, shrouded in grief and sorrow all of these years. It is a light that rekindles within her whenever Rhyden is near. For every winter, there must come a spring, and I could never love Aigiarn so selfishlessly as to deny her that. Unlike Toghrul, I accepted long ago that I could not have her. Just because we love someone, Nala—no matter how deeply or truly—it does not mean they must love us in return. We cannot always have the love we want simply because we feel entitled to it."

He meant these words for her, as well, and she knew it. For two years now, Nala had been his lover. She had also tried to be his love, to earn his heart. Nala was dear to him, and Yeb cared deeply for her, but he did not love her, not in the way that she wanted him to. He had never lied to her about this; he had never made promises to her that he could not keep. He had never told her he loved her, because a part of his heart would not let him. Here, it was still winter inside of Yeb; he, too, was simply waiting for his moment of springtime to come.

Nala looked at him, her mouth spreading again in a slight smile. "When you make love to me, do you think of Aigiarn?"

He touched her face, smiling at her. “No,” he said softly. “When I am with you, my heart and mind are, too, Nala.”

She hooked her arms around his neck, draping her hands against his braided hair. She drew her legs up, wrapping them about his waist, crossing her ankles against the small of his back. They were weightless in the jabsar; their feet remained on what their eyes perceived as the ground simply because their minds willed it so. He had taught her how to float here, to fly, to command the reality of the jabsar by her thoughts, her will alone. Nala was strong enough, her hiimori powerful enough to serve her well in the spiritual plane. Yeb had offered her guidance, counsel and instruction whenever he had been able. He had sensed the strength of her gerel from the moment he had first met her, and he had made no secret that he thought her talents as a shaman wasted as a simple midwife’s apprentice.

She was right. He would need her in the days to come, and Yeb was grateful for her presence.

“I am glad you are here,” he told her, cupping his hands against her hips.

“I love you,” she said, kissing him.

He smiled as she eased her mouth away from him, holding his bottom lip lightly, playfully between her lips. “I know you do,” he whispered.

She moved, letting her breasts press against him, her hips slide with deliberate, gentle friction against his. He had made love to her countless times in the mortal plane, long hours spent in her company, but when they were apart, when he was with the Kerait, and she with the Uru’ut, they would meet sometimes in the jabsar. Here, their spirits would mingle with as much passion and enthusiasm as their forms might have.

Nala was an exuberant, eager lover, and when Yeb moved her in the jabsar, her gerel would blaze like bright, scarlet fire, engulfing them both.

“Be with me, Yeb,” she said. “Body, mind, heart. Be with me here.”

He kissed her deeply, feeling her clothing dissipate like smoke beneath his palms. In the jabsar, any reality was only a thought away in the mind of a skilled and powerful shaman. Yeb willed the illusion of his own clothing, his del and khurim, leggings and gutal away, and he drew her hips against him with his hands. She moaned against his mouth, and as they moved together in the jabsar, he had no other thought in his mind save for her.

“I do not trust the Elf,” Toghrul said to Juchin.

The older man glanced at him, raising his brow. “You do not trust anyone, Toghrul,” he said pointedly, making Toghrul smirk.

The two stood near the helm, at the tapered corner of the knarr’s stern. Toghrul glanced over his shoulder at the boat behind them. The three Uru’ut vessels traveled in a line, marking a brisk pace across the surface of the bay as they rowed toward the mouth of the Toda River. Aigiarn had taken Temu aboard the boat with Rhyden without even the courtesy of Toghrul’s counsel. Whatever events had occurred during the night had served to cement within Aigiarn’s mind—and Temu’s as well—that the Elf was some sort of guardian to the boy, someone whose hiimori would keep Temu safe.

“You do not think the Elf is as strong as Yeb and Aigiarn believe?” Juchin asked.

Toghrul frowned. “No, I think he is that strong. And that is what troubles me, Juchin. How did the Khahl know where to find your aysil? Yeb has seen them in his

mind, these images of ravens they are using to disguise themselves, their movements. They know we are traveling—and why—but they cannot know where. How could they know? Even their strongest yeke shaman, the idugan Khidyr Shriagal is no match for Yeb's buyu. He can keep us shielded from their hiimori, our location secret from them. How would they know to strike your aysil—that you would lead them to us if they followed you? It does not seem like a simple matter of luck to me. They knew somehow.”

“The gazriin ezen spirit they have found, Mongoljin Burilgitu is strong enough to best even bugu Yeb's spells,” Juchin said. “She could see us, find us.”

“Mongoljin's spirit is new to them,” Toghrul said. “She must be. They would have unleashed her before now, otherwise. But I think another spirit, one whose powers are also stronger than Yeb's might have told them where we are—where your aysil might be found.”

Juchin blinked at him. He looked over his shoulder toward the second knarr. “You think the Elf told them? You think he is with them somehow...with the Khahl or the empire?”

“I had thought the empire at first,” Toghrul said. “But it makes no sense to me now. What interest would the empire have in the dragons? They think they are barbaric legends, nothing but lore. The Khahl believe, however—as much as we do—and like us, they would do whatever they can to claim the dragons for themselves.”

“I do not believe the Elf could be strong enough to hide such an allegiance from Yeb,” Juchin said.

“He is strong enough to fool Yeb’s hiimori,” Toghrul told him. “I have seen it myself. He carries a weapon with him, a sword he uses to conjure a blade of fire. It is like nothing I have ever seen. He has power enough for this. I think he has power enough to have conjured visions for Yeb and Temu, too—visions of the golden falcon—to lure them to him, to trick us into trusting, believing in him. Maybe the Khahl learned of our map. It would not be so hard for them. They take so many of our people as prisoner or slave. Someone must have told them, and they must have realized the Elf could read the map. They mean for him to read it, but not so he can lead Temu to the lair—so he can lead Targutai to it.”

Juchin frowned thoughtfully, propping his hand against the pommel of his scimitar.

“He moves like the hoyin’irgen, Juchin,” Toghrul said, leaning toward the older noyan and speaking in a low voice. “I have seen him myself, as though he was raised among us, or the Khahl—swift and silent in the trees, his feet sure along the branches. No Torachan can move like that.”

“He is not a Torachan,” Juchin said. “Aigiarn said he is from the west, from—”

“He is no more from the west than I am,” Toghrul said. “He is a slave with deformed ears brought from the southern empire to serve the Khahl. This land he claims he comes from, ‘Tiralainn’ is nothing but fable—baga’han lore. Who can prove it exists? No one. The Khahl knew this—and they knew we would believe it if it seemed good fortune that we should come upon him. Aigiarn believes it. She is desperate to.”

He placed his hand against Juchin’s shoulder, leaning closer to him. “He is leading us into a trap,” he said. “I know it. All of this has been too perfect, too easy. How

do we know he truly defeated Mongoljin? This great battle supposedly took place in the jabsar, with only Temu—a frightened boy—as a witness. What if it was a ruse? What if the Elf only seemed to fight Mongoljin, to defeat her, because they are allies against us?”

“Why would the Khahl do all of this?” Juchin asked. “If they mean to see Targutai claim the dragons, why do they not just try and kill Temu? Why send a spy among us—and why under such an unfamiliar guise?”

“Because they need Temu,” Toghrul said. “The Elf could read the map for them, the inscriptions of the lair’s threshold, but only Temu can call them forth. Targutai cannot. I think the Khahl mean to see us through to the lair, to let Temu fulfill his destiny, and then the Elf will betray him—betray all of us, Juchin.”

He tightened his fingers against Juchin’s shoulder. “He is dangerous. He has cast some sort of spell upon Aigiarn and Yeb, I know he has. Why else would they trust him without question?”

“Why would he cast buyu upon them and leave the rest of us?” Juchin asked, raising his brow. “Why would he not put this same spell on you, Toghrul?”

“He does not need me to believe him. He only needs Aigiarn and Yeb. They hold the power among our people—they are the only ones who need to be convinced to see us spurred into action. The Khahl know it, Juchin, and the Elf does, too.”

“Can you prove this?” Juchin asked.

Toghrul looked down at his gutal. “No.” He glanced at Juchin, meeting his gaze. “But I know it is true. I spoke with Aigiarn this morning about my concerns, and she thinks I am being ridiculous. She does not believe me.”

Juchin raised his brow at Toghrul in surprise. “She has never doubted you before.”

“Not once,” Toghrul agreed. “In all of the years I have known her. The Elf has affected her somehow. He has befriended Temu and he has charmed Aigiarn, playing on the loneliness she still harbors for Yesugei. He has clouded her heart with his buyu.” He turned his head, his brows furrowed as he glared at the knarr behind him. He closed his hands into fists. “He cannot be trusted. Even if we could convince Aigiarn, we cannot send him away. He has seen the map. He knows where it leads. The Khahl are following us, from what you have said, and they would find him. He would lead them after us, straight into the mountains.”

Toghrul smacked the side of his fist against the bulwark. “How I would like to tuck my blade beneath his chin and jerk it swiftly, open his throat and be rid of him. We have enough of the map translated, and Yeb could decipher his notes. We do not need him.”

“If you are wrong, Toghrul, killing him would be killing us all,” Juchin told him quietly. “If he is the golden falcon Ag’iamon promised, we *do* need him. No matter what you say, the map is not fully translated. There will be no finding the lair without it—without him, and no hope or future for the Oirat.”

Toghrul frowned. “You do not believe me, either.”

“You are a man of honor, Toghrul, and I believe you are sincere in your concerns,” Juchin said. “You are speaking out of love for Temu, and the need to protect him. I will not arbitrarily dismiss your suspicions. However, I cannot rashly accept them as my own just yet. I am new to the Elf, and his circumstances, his story.”

He clapped his hand against Toghrul's shoulder. "I will watch him—I promise you this. You have traveled in his company for two weeks now, and no great harm has come of it—not even last night. No more can come in two days. Give me this. Let me consider it. I will speak with Aigiarn in the meantime, once we have reached the mouth of the Toga. I will see if I can persuade her to let Temu ride with us. At least he would be away from the Elf, safe with us for the time being."

"I am not wrong about this, Juchin," Toghrul said.

"Give me time, Toghrul," Juchin replied. "Give me two days. Let me see for myself."

Rhyden sat amidship, beneath the towering mast of the knarr. A small wooden box rested in front of him; he had balanced the sheathed blade of his dagger, the knife Aigiarn had given to him across a spread of parchment pages to keep them from blowing away while he worked on the map. It was all he could think to do, a way to keep his mind quiet and distracted. He was worried about Trejaeran, and anxious now that they were underway for the Toda River.

He held the map in one hand. He set aside his small writing quill with the other and forked his fingers through his hair. He had no sense of Mongoljin within his mind, none of the pervasive uneasiness that had heralded her appearance the night before. He had no sense of Trejaeran, either, however, and this troubled him. He had tried to concentrate and open his mind to his friend, but had nothing within him. Yeb had told him Trejaeran's spirit needed to rest; he had been weakened already from his encounter with the Khahl shamans, and rescuing Yeb from the qarang'qui had stripped

what precious little strength had remained in him. Yeb had told him not to worry, that Ogotai was with Trejaeran, and Rhyden did his best to find some comfort in this.

He had experienced a strange sensation as he had extended his sight. For a fleeting, startling moment, he had thought he felt Aedhir's presence, heard Aedhir's voice crying out.

Pryce—please, get to the boat—get out of there! They are taking us to the beach. Mother Above—get out of there! They are taking us to the beach!

Rhyden's breath had stilled, his eyes growing wide as he had heard this in his mind. He had not given much thought to Aedhir over the last week or so, convinced that his friend had most likely sailed from Capua to Cneas to send word at once to Tiralainn about Rhyden's disappearance. Aedhir's voice had sounded so frantic—and so close by, as though he was somewhere near—that Rhyden had actually turned his face toward the open water, looking for the *a'Maorga*.

Aedhir? he had thought. *Aedhir, where are you?*

Temu had been sitting with him at the time. When Rhyden had heard Aedhir cry out, when he had looked out upon the water, his expression stricken, Temu had noticed right away.

“What is it, Rhyden?” he had asked softly, his eyes widening with trepidation.

Aedhir, can you hear me? Rhyden had thought.

“Rhyden?” Temu had placed his hand against Rhyden's sleeve, drawing his gaze. At the bright and apparent fear in the boy's face, Rhyden's expression had softened.

“It...it is nothing, Temu,” he had said. He had received no reply from Aedhir, but had not expected any. He had stopped trying to call to Aedhir with his mind after about two days with the Oirat. Every time he tried to open his mind and reach Aedhir, it had felt like he smacked headlong into a stone wall. At first, he had thought it was Yeb deliberately stifling him, keeping him from Aedhir. Though he knew this was untrue now, he still met with this same impenetrable resistance as he mentally reached out from the knarr for his friend, and it puzzled him.

Rhyden had shaken his head and smiled at Temu. “It is nothing,” he said again. “My imagination playing tricks on me, that is all.”

Temu had left him a short while ago for the helm. One of the Kelet named Jelmei had offered to let him man the rudder, and Temu had been excited and pleased for the chance. Rhyden had smiled as he watched the boy hurry toward the stern.

The solace he had hoped to find in his translations did not come. Everything he deciphered from Chegney into the common tongue needed a second translation, from riddles into landmarks, names and features familiar only in Ulusian terms. Yeb had been helping him all along with this, but the shaman seemed distracted now that the boats were out on the bay again. He sat across from Rhyden, his gaze distant, as though he was in a trance. Rhyden had tried to speak to him a time or two, but given up when his attempts elicited no reply.

With Yeb’s help, Rhyden had thus far managed to plot the first leg of their course for them, following the Toda to Koke Lake, and from here, traveling the length of the Urlug River, through the imposing Deguu Masiff ravine to the Harw River. The Harw drained into the Modun, and they meant to follow this westward.

From there, he did not know. The Modun forked into four separate rivers that branched out in broad, opposing directions. It was as far as Rhyden had been able to get, although he had not given up in his efforts. The text instructions were filled with distracting, cryptic comments and strange references. Some seemed innocuous, nearly mundane ramblings. Others were far more ominous.

Geyre'eeachlagh, one such line had read, meaning *sharp-toothed*. *Sleih'eeagh*, said another. *Man-eating*. At first, Rhyden had dismissed these repeated, peculiar references, but the more he read through them, the more disconcerted he became. *Feill'eeagh*, or *flesh-eating*. *Jioogh son fuill*, meaning *thirsty for blood*.

He had just finished translating several intricate lines of characters, work he had started several days before. *Eiyr ny inney'roie eear boayl ny clash'trome reuyrey dy dowin eddyr ny brollagha ny ben jee'aile kyrloghe*, the writing said. *Follow the running daughter where the hollow gorge delves deep between the breasts of the sleeping fire goddess*.

Unlike the other phrases that left him either bewildered or disturbed, this actually made a sort of sense to Rhyden. Yeb had drawn a duplicate of the map for him, carefully labeling all of the rivers and landforms he was able to identify, and translating the Ulusian names for these into common words that Rhyden could recognize. He leaned toward this map now, remembering the story Temu had told him the day before, as they had sailed into Tolui Bay and stood together, admiring the Khar mountains in the distance.

A long time ago, people called these the Yekegal, or great fire mountains. Golomto, the fire Tenger lives there. She fell asleep...she has been asleep ever since.

So long that Erdene Nur lake formed above her eyelid, and the great mountains Ondur Dobu and Mongke grew over her breasts.

He could see Ondur Dobu and Mongke on the map Yeb had drawn. They were the highest peaks in the Khar range. They were divided from one another by a deep, wide river gorge called the Qotoyor Berke, a cleft carved by the Okin River. The Okin River was fed by the Modun, and the Ulusian word *okin* meant *daughter*.

Follow the running daughter where the hollow gorge delves deep between the breasts of the sleeping fire goddess.

Rhyden lifted his quill in hand and jotted down his second translation: *Follow the Qotoyor Berke gorge, the Okin River between Ondur Dobu and Mongke.*

He smiled as he looked down at the note. *Three days worth of bloody effort for that*, he thought, shaking his head. *At least there is not one reference to 'blood-sucking,' 'bone-gnashing' or 'skull-splintering.'*

"You look pleased. Are you finished already?" Aigiarn asked, smiling as she sat beside him on the bench.

He turned to her, Trejaeran's words resounding in his mind again.

She might hold your heart, if you would let her.

"One more line, maybe," he told her with a laugh. "But it is one that makes sense to me for a change. I think I am getting better at this."

Her smile widened, and his breath nearly stilled. She had taken off her hat, and her hair had come loose of her plait in the wind. Dark, wayward strands draped and fluttered across her brow, the rounded curves of her cheeks, and she reached up, trying

to tuck them behind her small ears with her fingertips. *Mother Above, you are beautiful,* he thought.

“Can I help at all?” she asked, looking at him again.

“You could keep me company,” he said, and Aigiarn smiled.

“Alright.”

She looked down at the spread of parchments before him, the notes he had been writing, the instructions he had been transcribing. A silence settled between them, one she seemed comfortable enough with, but which left him slightly uncertain. After a long—and for Rhyden, awkward—moment, he made a quiet, coughing sound, drawing her gaze.

“Your friends seem nice,” he said. He looked out across the bow, toward the distant stern of the knarr in front of them. “The Uru’ut, I mean. Juchin and his people.”

“Juchin and his tribe have been our allies for a long time,” Aigiarn said, nodding. “He is likely one of the bravest men I have ever known...and one of the most selfless.” She followed his gaze to the boat carrying Juchin and Toghrul. “The Khahl attacked the Uru’ut just as you and Yeb saw—just like Temu’s visions showed him. Juchin told us they could hear the screams from a distance out on the water.”

Rhyden blinked at her, startled and stricken. “He did not go back and help them?”

Aigiarn shook her head. “There was nothing that could be done except put distance between them at the aysil, and prevent the Khahl from following them.” Despite her words, there was a sudden and profound sorrow in her face, as though the realization of this loss, the deaths of the Uru’ut pained her deeply.

Rhyden reached for her hand, closing his fingers against hers. "I am sorry, Aigiarn."

She shook her head, her brows drawing slightly. "We have always known that there would be sacrifices asked of us, all of us among the Oirat to see this through. My people believe in rebirth, and that the pains we suffer and endure in this lifetime are rewarded tenfold in the next. Juchin knew if he did not succeed...if he did not reach us...if we did not deliver Temu to the lair, that there would be no such reward for those we have lost." She looked down at the floor of the boat, her eyes forlorn. It was as if she offered words to convince herself as much as Rhyden.

"The dragons mean that much to you?" he asked her. "To your people?"

"It is not just that," Aigiarn said. "As much as Ag'iamon's promise to return, it is his promise that Temu would restore our empire that gives Juchin...gives us all hope." She glanced at Rhyden. "There was a time once when all of this land was ours," she said, stretching her hand toward the shore of Lydia. "As far as the eye could see, it was Ulusian. Galjin, Ebesun, Ordos, Bagahan, Lydia...all of it and more belonged to my people." She looked momentarily wistful. "I cannot imagine what that must have been like, to roam as far as your legs could bear you, for days and days—weeks and months, Rhyden, and always be home. Ag'iamon promised that would belong to us again—that it would belong to Temu."

He nodded wordlessly, averting his gaze toward her hand, her fingers draped between his own.

"You think we are mad to want that," she said.

“No.” Rhyden realized for the first time as Aigiarn told him of the Uru’ut massacre, and of Juchin’s seeming abandonment of his people to this horrific fate just how determined the Oirat were to see Temu fulfill his destiny, and just how special and extraordinary Temu was to them. Temu was still so young; he did not realize his import among his people, his influence upon them, but Aigiarn did, and Rhyden could sense it through her.

He is a messiah to them, he thought. He is meant to do more than free the dragons—he is meant to free the Oirat, as well.

Temu might have been a messiah to his people, but to Aigiarn, he was still her son. He could sense this within her plainly. He could feel her uncertainty, the troubles that this brought to her heart. She understood what destiny meant for Temu, and her people, but she struggled to reconcile it within her heart. She was brokenhearted to know of the Uru’ut murders. He could sense it within her, see it in her face. She did not want harm to come to Temu, and she could not bear to think that harm had come to her people because of Temu, or her.

“Juchin would sacrifice himself, and gladly,” she said. “But I am not Juchin. Like I told you last night, I would give it all up—the dragons, the promise of the empire—all of it. I would not risk my son...or anyone else dear to me.”

I would not risk you, Rhyden, she thought, brushing her thumb against the backs of his fingers. She did not realize he could hear her thoughts, and the candor of her mind, the sudden warmth of tender emotion he could sense from her, moved him beyond measure.

Her gaze was drawn to a necklace draped about his neck. He had been wearing it tucked beneath the overlapping collars of his khurim and del, but had drawn it out as he worked on the map, toying absently with the small hide pouch tethered to the strap of sinew with his fingertips.

“This is Temu’s,” she said, touching the pouch.

“Yes,” he said. “I found it in the woods before we left this morning. I tried to give it to him, but he told me he did not want it.”

“It is his ongon,” she said quietly, her expression troubled. “It is a talisman. It is supposed to keep his utha suld near to him, Yesugei’s spirit.”

“I know,” he said, nodding. He had discovered the little ongon among the fallen pine needles and snow as they had been preparing to leave. He had also found the toli mirror Yeb had given to Temu nearby, and he had brought them both to Temu. Toghrul had sent word to the campsite about Juchin’s arrival, and Aigiarn, Yeb and the other Oirat had already left, making their way toward the beach, leaving Rhyden and Temu alone for a moment.

The boy had taken the toli, drawing it about his neck and hooking his fingers about the amulet. He had glanced at the ongon in Rhyden’s hand, and his face had grown momentarily forlorn. “I...I do not want that,” he had said, his brows pinching together.

Rhyden had blinked at him in surprise. “But it is yours, Temu,” he said. “It is your ongon. I found it in the underbrush there—”

“She took it from me,” Temu had interrupted, frowning. “She waved her hand and it flew away from my neck. I do not want it anymore.”

“Temu, this is part of your father,” Rhyden had said quietly. He had cradled the boy’s hand against his own and pressed the ongon into the basin of Temu’s upturned palm. “He is your utha suld, like Trejaeran is for me. This keeps his spirit near to you.”

“He is not like Trejaeran,” Temu had snapped angrily, drawing away from Rhyden and stumbling backwards. “Trejaeran protects you. He loves you and keeps you safe. My father does not protect me. He does not love me and he did not come for me.”

“Temu,” Rhyden had said, stricken, reaching for him. “That is not true. He—”

“It is true!” Temu had cried, recoiling again. He had cocked his arm back and hurled the ongon, sending it flying across the campsite as tears spilled down his cheeks. “I know it is true! He left me there! He did not come for me in the jabsar—not even when I called for him, begged him to help me! He left me there all alone and Mongoljin would have sent me to the qarang-qui, too, like she did Yeb, if you...if you had not...” He had blinked at Rhyden, the fury draining from his face, leaving only despair and bewilderment. “He did not come for me,” Temu had whispered, trembling.

“Temu...” Rhyden had begun.

Temu had fallen against him, hugging him fiercely. His arms closed about Rhyden’s midriff and he tucked his cheek against Rhyden’s breast. “I...I wish you were my father, Rhyden!”

Startled, Rhyden had stroked his hand against Temu’s braid, and held him gently. “Oh, Temu...”

“Temu told you he did not want it?” Aigiarn asked Rhyden, her face stricken.

“I think he is angry with Yesugei,” Rhyden said quietly. “He does not understand. He told me when Mongoljin attacked him in the jabsar, he thought his father would protect him. He called for him, but he did not come.” She looked dismayed as he spoke, and he closed his hand gently against hers. “I do not think he could come, Aigiarn. Yeb told me Mongoljin was strong enough to drive Ogotai outside of the jaqa and keep him away. I am sure Yesugei’s spirit was also forced away, but Temu...he does not understand.”

Aigiarn nodded, her expression still distraught. “Parents are not supposed to fail you,” she said. “Or disappoint you.”

“Sometimes they do anyway,” Rhyden said gently. He thought of his own parents, particularly his father. Eisos had never intended to hurt or betray Rhyden; he had done what he thought was best by breaking his promise to his son and not destroying the Book of Shadows. Eisos had certainly never anticipated how crestfallen and anguished Rhyden would be to learn of his deception, or the bitterness it would breed toward him within Rhyden’s heart. “Even when they do not mean to.”

He realized that she might be upset if he kept the ongon, and he drew his hand away from hers, ducking his head. “I am sorry,” he said. He pulled the loop of sinew from around his neck. “I thought I would hold it until he is ready...until he wants it back. But it is not mine to keep.”

He offered it to her, and she cradled the ongon between her palms, staring down at it. “He wants so badly to know Yesugei,” she whispered. “To feel some connection to him. Something...anything. I try to tell him about his father, but it...”

But it hurts me so badly, she thought.

“...it is hard,” she said aloud. She sighed unhappily and glanced at Rhyden. “How do you tell someone about a man they never knew? How can I...how can I ever hope to make Temu understand what kind of person Yesugei was? The contents of his mind...the caliber of his heart? How can I find the words to describe the sound of his laughter...the way it...it rumbled beneath his chest like distant thunder, or the way his eyes would glow, his face would fill with joy whenever he would smile...?”

Her voice faded and she looked down at the ongon again, blinking against tears. “How can I tell him about the dreams we shared? The conversations...the way his breath felt against my face when he would whisper to me in the dark of our ger at night, when I was heavy with Temu. He was so happy, so excited. It did not matter to Yesugei that Temu was the Negh. He was his son before anything—before everything.”

She looked at Rhyden, grief-stricken and helpless. “He loved Temu. He wanted Temu so badly. He was so eager to be a father. The joy on his face while I carried Temu...and those three days after he was born...I had never seen it within Yesugei before. I want Temu to know that. I want to tell him that, make him understand.”

She pressed her fingertips against her lips. “This is all my fault,” she said softly, stricken.

“Aigiarn, no,” Rhyden said. “No, it is not.”

“On the night Yesugei died, I had gotten up from our pallet,” she said. “We had our own ger at the Naiman aysil, and Temu...he was only three days old. He was crying, ready to nurse and I...it was very late, and I did not want his cries to wake Yesugei.” She looked at Rhyden. “I took Temu outside of the ger. We kept a communal fire in the center of the aysil and I went there. Yeb found me. Something troubled him.

He told me ‘there is a wolf among us.’ He could see wolves within his mind, but did not know what the images meant. We went back together to my ger, and that...that was when we found Yesugei.

“A Minghan assassin had crept into the tent,” she whispered. “He ran his knife through Yesugei’s breast. Yesugei did not even rouse. He did not live long enough to scream. The furs and blankets were soaked with his blood. I could smell it...even before I saw it, before I realized, I could smell it, and I...I think I must have understood. I must have known.”

Rhyden touched her hand again, and her fingers coiled about his tightly, clutching at him. Her breath fluttered from her throat. “His killer was still in the ger. Our fire had faded into embers, and he was hiding in the shadows. He lunged at me with his scimitar—he meant to kill Temu. If it had not been for Yeb...I was in such shock, I...I could not even breathe, and Yeb grappled with him, snapped his neck between his hands. I can still remember the sound of it...moist and...and crunching, and the way his breath, his voice sort of gargled in his throat.

“Yeb grabbed me. He dragged me to the north side of the ger and took Yesugei’s map, his box with the wooden inscription and he dragged me outside with him. I could hear something like thunder...the paws or bergelmirs against the ground as the Khahl Minghan came upon us. Yeb made me run with him into the woods, and as we fled, I...I could hear them...my people...my friends...screaming from the aysil. We did not stop, not the night through, not until dawn. I do not remember much of it.” Aigiarn blinked, stricken. “All I kept thinking was my Yesugei was gone.”

“Aigiarn...” Rhyden said softly, pained for her.

“I did not even get to tell him good-bye,” she whispered, and she closed her eyes. Her brows furrowed and she pressed her lips together for a long moment in stubborn defiance of her tears. “It is not fair.”

“I know.” He could feel her inside of him, her mind’s quiet whispers within his, unabated. He knew he should rein his sight in, and keep from her mind, but he could not help himself. He could feel her sorrow, and it was familiar to him...because it was his own.

“You told me last night that you felt responsible for Trejaeran’s death,” she said to him. “That maybe you could have stopped it somehow, done something different, prevented it.” She met his gaze. “I have always felt that way, too. I wanted to tell you that last night, but I...it is hard for me. For nine years, I have thought if I had only stayed in the ger...if I had nursed Temu by our own fire instead of taking him outside, Yesugei might have woken up. I might have heard the Minghan slip inside, or seen him...cried out, warned Yesugei.” She pressed her fingertips against her brow. “So many things I might have done that might have made a difference.”

Rhyden thought about what Trejaeran had told him. *You could not have stopped me. You could not have prevented what happened, no matter how fast you had run, no matter what words you might have found to offer had you reached me in time.*

“Aigiarn,” he said softly, squeezing her hand gently to draw her gaze. “It was not your fault.”

She blinked at him, new tears glistening in her eyes. He brushed the cuff of his fingers against her cheek. “It was not your fault,” he said again.

“I have tried so hard to protect Temu,” she said. “All of these years, I...I have fought and struggled to keep him safe. I did not keep Yesugei safe, but I have tried for my son, with all that I have, all that is within me. And last night, I failed him.”

“No,” Rhyden said, shaking his head.

“I failed him,” Aigiarn said again. “He...the Tengri only knows what would have happened to him, what Mongoljin would have done if you...if you had not...”

“Aigiarn, no,” he said.

“If he had died, it would have all been for nothing,” she whispered. “Yesugei’s death...all of these years...all of this suffering...the Uru’ut at the aysil...” Her voice faltered, and she lowered her head. “All because I could not protect him.”

“You could not have known,” he said. “No one could have.” She shook her head, and he reached for her, tucking his fingertips beneath her chin, drawing her gaze. “It is not your fault,” he told her softly.

She looked at him, her dark eyes still filled with tears that she refused to let fall. She reached for him, pressing her palm against his face. “I am so grateful for you, Rhyden,” she said, her mouth unfolding in a gentle smile.

For the first time in at least a decade, days had gone by, and he had not thought of Qynh. He had suffered no more dreams of her since the last at the palace, on the day Trejaeran had dispatched the Khahl’s shaman spirits. For the first time in years, the absence of her within his mind and heart did not fill his with poignant sorrow and longing, and he looked at Aigiarn, realizing that more than anyone or anything, she was the reason why. *I am so grateful for you, too, Aigiarn*, he thought.

“Your tattoo is fading,” she told him softly.

He blinked at her in surprise. "What?"

She nodded, brushing her thumb against the arch of his cheek. "I noticed it a few days ago. I thought I was imagining things, but no, it is fading. It is much lighter now than when we first met."

"It must be my healing," he said. "I had not thought of that, but now that you mention it, I have never seen an Elf with a tattoo before. Maybe we cannot keep them very long."

"Another week, and it might be gone," she said, leaning toward him to peer closely at his catasta mark. Her hair brushed against his face, and Rhyden closed his eyes, drawing in the soft fragrance of wood smoke and wind from the wayward strands against his nose. She turned to look at him, close enough to his face to still his breath.

"You will be free without it...no longer mine." Aigiarn smiled as she said this, but her eyes were forlorn.

Rhyden smiled, the delicate scent of her hair still lingering with him. *I do not know about that.*

Chapter Five

There were worse fates a man could face than to be killed by the Enghan's arrows, Jobin Dunster had come to realize, and far worse things that lay hidden among the mountainsides and pine forests of the northern Torachan empire than the wild men of Sube.

Deaglan Arles had been killed during the second volley of arrows fired by the Enghan archers from the shore. Jobin had known Deag for almost ten years; the two had been drinking companions, if not friends. Deag had been hunkered down at the helm of the longboat, his legs squatted beneath him, the rudder clutched between his fists as he had screamed orders to the panicked crew.

"Row! Put your backs into it, you bastard rots and row, damn you!" he had shrieked. A thick length of ash had speared through the side of Deag's neck, knocking him off of his feet and sending him sprawling against the starboard bulwark. Jobin had turned, crouched on his knees before his rowing bench as the arrows hissed overhead. He had stared at Deag, wide-eyed with shock and horror, watching a sudden, violent torrent of blood gush from the man's pierced jugular, soaking the front of his coat.

"Well, damn," Deag had said, and then he had died. No profound final thoughts or prolific last words for old Deag. He had died pretty much as he had lived—profane and to the point. He had met Jobin's eyes, and blood had spurted from between his lips. He had said this last, his brows drawn as though his demise aggravated him more than anything else, and then he had slumped facedown upon the floor.

His loss was felt immediately among the crew. Most were not grief-stricken, *per se*; Deag had not been the most affable or likeable of characters, but he had been the boatswain's mate, the most capable and experienced among them outside of the senior officers. Without Deag to bark orders at them, none of the others seemed to know what to do. They were frantic—oars slapped the water with no concerted rhythm; they screamed and yelled at one another as more arrows flew.

The current of the Qoyina channel had caught them, drawing them east. The Enghan had followed them, shooting more arrows. Tuathal Millichamp had caught one in the side of his head. He had pitched sideways into Prew Brumford, who had promptly begun to shriek and thrash against Tuathal's leaden, lifeless weight like a hysterical woman faced with a spider. He had stood up, flapping his hands, turning loose of his oar and dancing as Tuathal's corpse slumped against his legs, and then an arrow had slammed into Prew's temple with enough force to send him pitching sideways, tumbling over the side of the boat and into the water.

This left Jobin alone with Phelim Robilard and Frey Goldron to man the oars, a relative impossibility. The longboat had been designed to maneuver with a crew of no less than six men. Three were not enough. Three was pathetically lacking. The longboat had drifted helplessly in the current while its trio of occupants flattened themselves in terror against the deck. No one had thought to serve as a lookout, and when the current dragged them too near to a cragged shoal about twenty feet off of the coast of the Ulusian Nuqut peninsula, the longboat lurched beneath them. Jobin had heard a low, grinding, terrifying sound as the submerged rocks ripped into the wooden hull, rending into the keel, splintering the planks.

“Mother Above!” Phelim had screamed. They had floundered, caught like hares in a pen on the shoals. The three of them had abandoned any courtesy of mutual counsel, and had reacted instinctively, leaping over the side of the boat and into the shallow, frigid water. They had paddled and scrambled for shore, gasping for breath. They had scurried together, shuddering and sodden along the steep, muddy beach and into the snow-draped, frost-encrusted pine forests beyond.

They had run without thinking about where they were going. They had been able to hear the sounds of the Enghan’s voices, calling out sharply to one another in a peculiar, unfamiliar language from the direction of the beach as they drew their longboat within wary distance of the shoals. Jobin did not know if they had come ashore to chase them or not; he had been too busy putting distance between his body and the bay to notice such minor details. He imagined in retrospect that they had not. The rocks that had damaged the *a’Maorga’s* longboat would have kept them from running aground, and he doubted the Enghan would wade ashore through the icy water just to hunt down and kill three men the elements would likely take care of in their stead by nightfall.

They had no food, no change of clothes and no water. They were soaking wet and shivering, and were hopelessly, helplessly lost in the woods. Jobin did not realize that Phelim had been wounded until they stopped to whoop for breath nearly twenty minutes into their frantic flight. As they had stood together beneath the venerable, towering pines, sequoias and firs, he had seen a dark stain on the back of Phelim’s wet coat. He had been shot with an arrow, but managed to snap the long shaft off at the tip, leaving the head still buried midway along his back. Phelim had limped about, ashen from blood loss, his eyes wide and haunted with shock. He seemed to be incapable of

saying anything but “Mother Above,” and he said this over and over again as he shuffled dazedly through the snow.

“Mother Above,” Phelim whimpered. A thin trail of blood leaked from his mouth, dribbling down his chin. The arrow had apparently skewered a lung, and his breath whistled moistly, laboriously from his chest. “Mother Above...Mother Above...”

“What are we going to do?” Frey asked. “Do you think they followed us, Jobin? Do you, Phelim? Do you hear them? Do you? What are we going to do?”

Frey’s eyes darted all about him, as anxious and panic-stricken as a squirrel chased by a hunting pack. Of all of the bloody damn louts aboard the longboat, it figured Jobin would be stuck with Frey Goldron—always complaining, ever afraid of his own bloody damn shadow and fairly well witless besides. He would have liked to have counted Phelim among their numbers, but to his casual observance, old Phelim was fading fast. Phelim coughed, moaning as the effort wracked his form, and when he doubled over in pain, blood spattered from his lips.

“Mother Above...” he whispered hoarsely, spitting.

“Do you hear them?” Frey whined. “Do you? Do you think they followed us? Oh, Mother, they are going to kill us. They are going to—”

“Shut your mouth, Frey,” Jobin snapped. “Just shut your bloody rot damn mouth! I do not know if they bloody followed us! How can you hope that we could hear anything above your rot damn blithering? Shut up!”

He had hurried over to Phelim, wrapping his arm about the man. “Phelim, can you walk?” he asked. There was no point in asking “are you alright?” Only an idiot could

not see that Phelim was a far cry from “alright.” Phelim was dying. Jobin knew it, and Phelim knew it, too. He blinked at Jobin, frightened and trembling.

“Mother Above...” he whispered.

“Can you walk?” Jobin asked again. Phelim might have been dying, but he was not dead yet, and Jobin did not want to leave him for the Enghan to find. Phelim nodded his head, muttering “Mother Above” several times in a row. “Come on,” Jobin said quietly, leading Phelim in tow as he started to move among the trees again. He did not extend this instruction to Frey; he held no qualms about abandoning the younger man to the Enghan. An arrow through his rot, whining, hollow skull would be a blessing and favor to the Bith, in Jobin’s opinion.

“Where are we going to go?” Frey asked, following along. “Where are we going, Jobin? We do not even know where we are.”

“We are in the empire, that is where we are, you rot,” Jobin said, glowering at him. “Where there is empire proper, sooner or later, there is bound to be imperial troops.”

Hopefully more soon than later, he thought grimly to himself. It was freezing cold, and his clothes were soaking wet. He shuddered with chill; if they did not find shelter and some means of building a fire for warmth sometime soon, he knew they would freeze to death.

Phelim stumbled, leaning heavily against him. He moaned softly, his footsteps dragging in the snow. “It is alright,” Jobin said to him. “Come on, Phelim, keep with me now. It will be alright.”

“What do you think has happened to the others?” Frey asked. “Captain Fainne and...and Thierley, and Lieutenant Finamur?”

“They are dead,” Jobin said, frowning. “Shut up and walk.”

“They...killed them?” Frey asked, breathless with new horror. He turned and looked over his shoulder, as though he expected to be able to see the beach they had abandoned yet within view. “Hoah...Jobin, they...they killed the Captain? Do you really think so?”

“What did you think became of them?” Jobin asked. “The bloody damn Enghan invited them to their country manor estate for biscuits and tea? What is the matter with you, Frey? Mother Above, you are a stupid damn rot. Shut up.”

“They are going to kill us, too,” Frey moaned quietly. “Oh, I just know it. They are going to find us, and kill us, too.”

There were worse fates a man could face than to be killed by the Enghan’s arrows, though Jobin had not realized this fully for at least another fifteen minutes. They tromped through the snow, weaving among the trees. Phelim still lived, but his gait had grown clumsy, his weight insistent against Jobin. His voice had faded into silence, his breath into moist, snuffling wheezes. As they moved along, Phelim left a bright, smeared blood trail in the snow behind him. Jobin knew if the Enghan had come ashore, they would be able to follow it; however, by this point, he had fairly well convinced himself that the Enghan had abandoned their pursuit. He had thought they were safe. It never occurred to him that the trail of Phelim’s waning life left in the snow might attract something other than Enghan...something much, much worse.

Phelim's legs failed him, buckling, and he leaned heavily against Jobin as he crumpled toward the ground. "Hoah, Phelim—" Jobin said, struggling to keep his arm about Phelim, to hoist him roughly up again. "We cannot stop now. Not yet. Just a bit further. Come on now."

He could see some cragged outcroppings of rocks ahead of them through the dense trees, the leading edge of granite foothills approaching the Khar mountains. If he looked just right among the trunks and branches, Jobin could see the Khar in the distance, ghostlike shadows etched against the backdrop of grey clouds. Jobin hauled Phelim upright but Phelim staggered, moaning weakly, his face twisted with pain, his mouth and chin smeared with blood.

"Come on now," Jobin said again.

"Is he going to be alright?" Frey asked, staring wide-eyed and stricken at Phelim.

"He is going to be fine," Jobin said, grunting as he bore Phelim's uncomfortable weight. "There are some rocks up ahead, some hills. Maybe there is a cave we can use for shelter."

"That is a good idea," Frey said as they moved again. "We can rest for awhile, Phelim. You will feel better with some rest."

Jobin wanted to clamp his palms about Frey's throat and throttle him until his eyes bulged loose of their sockets. *He is a bloody damn idiot*, he thought. *Mother Creator, I am stuck in the middle of bloody rot nowhere with the biggest damn fool in the entire Bith. No, Phelim will not feel better with some rest, you moron! He is bloody dying, for the love of the Good Mother!*

He was so busy glaring at Frey, wondering how the young man could have made it through nearly two decades of life—five spent among the crew of the *a'Maorga*—without a lick of wits swimming in his skull, that he did not hear a soft, peculiar rustling sound from his right. He caught a sudden blur of moment out of the corner of his eye and he jerked his head just as something enormous and heavy slammed into him, throwing him off of his feet and sending him sprawling in the snow.

“Phelim!” Frey screamed.

Jobin sat up, confused and frightened. He had a half-second to realize that some sort of gigantic animal had leapt out from among the trees, and had tackled Phelim with enough force to plow Jobin nearly five feet away from where his boot tracks stopped in the snow. The animal had Phelim pinned beneath it, its broad forepaws planted on the injured man’s shoulders. Jobin had never seen anything like the beast; it was at least six feet long, stocky and thick. Its head was broad, its snout short, its mouth wide and lined with long, hooked teeth. It had wide-set eyes, and a pointed ears. Its fur was dappled auburn and black, with paler markings that formed a mask about its snout and eyes. Its tail was at least as big around as Jobin’s thigh; each of its paws larger than both of his hands put together.

He remembered that the midshipman, Wenham Poel had described such an animal to the longboat crew; he and Tacita had stumbled upon one dead in the forest on one of the first days of their voyage. It was a *narsana*, Wen had told them.

Tacita said they are one of the largest predators in the northern Morthir, Wen had said. This one was a rogue—a lone male, but she said usually they hunt in packs.

The narsana stared at Jobin, its black lips wrinkling back from its teeth. It uttered a low, throaty cry and then it jerked its paw. It boasted an extra digit on each forelimb, a sort of thumb-like projection armed with a massive length of claw. This claw sliced through the soft flesh of Phelim's throat before the man even had time to recover from its initial attack, much less hitch in a breath to scream. Blood spewed in a sudden, arcing geyser, spraying wide enough to spatter across Jobin's cheek and temple.

"Mother Above!" he shrieked, scrambling to his feet.

More narsana appeared from the forest, slipping out of the shadows, stealing slowly toward them and Jobin froze, his breath tangling in his throat.

She said usually they hunt in packs.

"Mother Above...!" Jobin whimpered. He felt his bladder loosen in his terror; sudden heat spilled down the leg of his trousers.

Phelim convulsed beneath the first beast, his hands flapping weakly against the ground, a strange, gurgling sound emanating from his opened throat, and the other narsana—six in all from Jobin's horrified, stunned count—wiggled their noses, excited by the scent of his blood, fresh and strong in the air. They glowered at Jobin and Frey, who stumbled away from them, their eyes flown wide in terror.

"Oh, Mother Above...Mother Above...!" Jobin said again. He whirled about and began to run. Phelim was not dead yet, but his chances of survival had just decreased abysmally, in Jobin's opinion. He bolted, pumping his arms furiously, his feet pounding against the ground, his boot soles slipping and sliding for panicked purchase against the snow and underlying carpet of pine needles.

He could hear the narsana chasing him. They crashed through the trees, shaking the ground beneath their strong legs and massive paws. He could hear young tree limbs snapping and slapping as they tore past them, and he gritted his teeth, running with all of his might, until his lungs seared with the desperate need for air, and his heart felt as though it would burst from beneath his sternum in its frantic, strained measure.

“Jobin! Jobin! Please!” he heard Frey squealing as he raced along behind Jobin.

Go bugger yourself, Frey, Jobin thought, grimly, not slowing down in the slightest. He saw movement on his left, and he danced sideways, staggering and screaming as a narsana pounced at him, swinging those broad, wicked front paws for his face. The narsana missed him, and Jobin realized it had meant to. It was trying to startle him, to slow his gait enough for the others to catch up to him, so that they might all take part in ripping his flesh from bone, a sort of camaraderie among carnivores.

It is playing with me, he thought. *Mother Above, they are all playing with me like a bunch of bloody cats with a rot damn field mouse!*

Jobin ducked around a tree, lost his footing along the edge of a slight embankment and spilled ass-over-elbows into a streambed below. He rolled, grunting in pain as his shoulder, hip and head took turns smacking against the frozen ground. He landed in icy water and sat up, sputtering and choking for breath. He wasted no time and scrambled to his feet, slipping on the rocky bottom of the stream, nearly falling again. Jobin ran, following the streambed, his breath huffing from his flushed cheeks, staining the air around his head in a milky, frosted haze.

He heard a horrifying roar from behind him atop the embankment that made his flesh crawl, his buttocks reflexively clench. He heard Frey screaming—first in bright terror and then in unimaginable, gruesome agony.

“Jobin!” he screeched. “Jobin—help me—please—!” His voice dissolved into mindless shrieks that only galvanized Jobin into running all the harder.

After ten minutes of fleeing along the winding path of the stream, the sounds of the narsana following him faded into silence. Jobin let at least another ten pass by in his estimation without breaking his stride, until he felt some semblance of certainty that the animals had grown bored of chasing him and abandoned their hunt to return to the quarry they had already claimed—Frey and Phelim.

Jobin collapsed in a heap along the muddy slope of the stream. He huddled, gasping for breath, shuddering from pate to heels. “Mother Above,” he whispered. His hands quaked uncontrollably as he drew them toward his face, shoving the heels against his brow. His chest ached; he felt as though he had strained ribs running so hard for so long. His legs were quivering and sore with exertion. He was exhausted and spent and leaned his shoulder against the embankment, whimpering softly as he tried to reclaim his breath.

“Mother Above...” he said, closing his eyes.

When a hand fell heavily against his shoulder, shoving him around, he screamed shrilly in new terror, his empty bladder loosening to no effect. His legs slipped out from beneath him and he landed on his rump, sprawled in the mud. He hitched in another breath to shriek, and it tangled, catching in his throat as he saw the wink of muted

sunlight off of steel—a very long sword, with a broad, curved tip rested beneath his chin, the hooked point pressing firmly against his flesh.

A man stood behind him. He had moved so quietly along the side of the stream, Jobin had been completely unaware of his approach. The man was tall and muscular, with broad shoulders and long legs. He wore some sort of heavy hide overcoat that fell below his knees, double-breasted across his torso, with thick sleeve cuffs made of pale fur. A scarlet, sleeveless wool vest with a hem that dropped to his groin was fastened over this, and heavy panels of leather, like armor, were strapped across his wide chest and shoulders. He wore a thick belt lined with numerous pouches and compartments; he carried a broad sheath for his sword, and another with a long, fat dagger fettered at his hips. He had black hair gathered in a braid down the length of his spine and wore a dome-shaped leather helmet with a spray of coarse hair, like a horse's tail, that had been dyed a vibrant shade of red sprouting from the top. A fleece-lined panel of hide framed the rim of the helm, covering the man's ears and neck against the wind. His boots were peculiar, broad and rounded through the soles, with toes that canted upward in unfamiliar, distinctive points.

The man had a golden complexion, like dried parchment or old linen. He had rounded facial features; broad, high cheekbones, a small but full mouth. His nose was short in length and wide, nearly flat at the tip. His eyes were dark, and seemed to cant toward his temples, slanted beneath his brows.

There were twenty other men of similar appearance and garb standing nearby, framing the banks of the stream. Their faces looked exactly as Aedhir had described the

Oirat, and Jobin moaned softly, the contents of his bowels nearly joining those of his bladder against the underside of his breeches.

Mother Above, they are Oirat! Jobin thought, and he whimpered as the man before him moved his sword, clamping one large, gloved hand about Jobin's neck, hauling him abruptly, roughly to his feet.

They bound his hands in front of him. They shoved a wad of rolled linen in his mouth and tied it roughly in place about his head with a length of coarse wool. They blindfolded him, wrapping a dark scrap of fabric over his eyes. They did all of this in absolute silence. Jobin pleaded with them, tried to reason with them. When his words dissolved into garbled, helpless sounds around the gag, he mewled at them, squirming against his bonds. They did not speak to each other or to him. They trussed and muffled him, and then they dragged him, stumbling and terrified, along the streambed, their heavy hands upon him, their blades still drawn, the steel tips pointing into his skin.

They forced him astride some kind of animal, hauling him onto what felt like a broad saddle beneath his hips. At first he thought it was a horse, but then it occurred to Jobin that he had never heard a horse that sounded like the animal he sat upon; he had never ridden a horse that felt like this between his legs. The animal had snuffled at him as he approached, a low, moist huffing sound, like a dog sniffing an unfamiliar scent in the wind. It had growled and grumbled as they shoved him astride its saddle, making a low, chattering sound in its throat like an irritable weasel. He could smell it, a thick, musky odor coming from its fur. Its shoulders felt broader to him than a horse's, its neck shorter and thicker as it drew its head up. One of the men mounted the beast behind

Jobin, and when he uttered a sharp, clucking sound with his tongue, the animal had sprung forward, breaking into a sudden, brisk lope that was definitely not the gait of a horse.

Jobin had yowled as the animal moved, alarmed by its pace, frightened of falling. He felt the Oirat man wrap his arm about his midriff, keeping him steady in the saddle as they moved. He could not hear the distinctive sounds of hooves cleaving the ground, only a heavy, rapid patter, like large paws smacking into the earth. The creature leaped, its spine elongating as it bounded up the slope of the streambed and dashed into the forest, moving with such astonishing grace and ease that Jobin was stunned.

Hoah, Mother Above, I am in trouble here, he thought.

Jobin did not know how long they rode. He had no definite concept of any passing time. It felt like forever to him. His legs, already weary and aching from his flight in the woods, screamed in fresh, new pain after being bounced and jostled in the saddle for so long. His buttocks felt numb, while his poor pair, knocked and rattled against some unyielding saddle crest before him throbbed unmercifully, making him feel nauseous and woozy. He could hear the sounds of pine limbs snapping past them; he could feel needles slapping sharply against his face. When the animal leaped and bounded along cragged outcroppings of rocks, climbing nimbly, Jobin could feel it. He listed precariously in the saddle, and would squeal in terror as the Oirat man clamped his arm firmly against his stomach.

His mind faded eventually, and he slumped, semi-lucid. By the time the animal slowed its manic pace, long hours had passed, the morning waning into afternoon, but he did not realize it. He came to his senses slowly, feeling the animal trot to a restless

halt beneath him. He felt the man loosen his grip, and abandon the saddle behind him; Jobin heard the soft rustle of the Oirat's boots dropping against the ground, crunching in snow and pine needles. The man hooked his arm around Jobin's waist and hauled him from the saddle. Jobin stumbled as his feet hit the ground. His exhausted, hurting legs refused to support his weight, and he crumpled, his knees buckling beneath him.

Wherever the Oirat had meant to bring him, they had obviously arrived. As his captor seized him roughly by the scruff of his coat and jerked him to his feet, forcing him into staggering step with him, Jobin heard voices all around him. They spoke in an unfamiliar language, peculiar, high-pitched voices like the chattering of anxious women. The voices overlapped into an undecipherable din.

There must be at least a hundred of them, from the sounds of it, he realized in dismay. Hoah, Sweet Mother, I am in trouble here.

He tried desperately to remember what Captain Fainne had told them about the Oirat. All that kept popping into Jobin's mind were Aedhir's grim warnings, foreboding phrases he had used like *ignorant barbarians* and *violent savages*. He and the others had spent many long hours in murmured conversation aboard the longboat talking about the Oirat, and what they might have done to the Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun.

"He is a pretty thing," Duffin Nevyne had said quietly on one such occasion. "You have all seen him—a man could do worse than to wake up one morning and look like that Elf. There is why they took him—nothing else, no matter what the Captain says. They are bugging him for certain. He probably cannot even walk of his own accord anymore, as much as they have all had their turns with him."

Jobin moaned again, thinking of this. *Oh, Mother Above...!* his mind whimpered helplessly.

On the other hand, Aedhir had been fairly insistent that the Oirat had intended no harm to the Elf. He had told the longboat crew that he believed the Oirat had found something in the mountains, an armory of weapons that had once belonged to the Dwarves; Aedhir had told them he thought they planned to use these weapons against the Torachan empire. The Captain had believed the weapons were sealed somehow by the Dwarves, a seal that could be opened when its inscriptions were read. That was why the Oirat had taken the Elf. He could read old Dwarf runes, speak the Dwarf-speech.

If that is true, Jobin thought with a sudden flutter of hope in his heart. *Hoah, if that is true, then surely they would not have hurt the Elf. You do not hurt or bugger someone you hope will help you—you treat them nicely, kiss their bloody asses.*

His mind was suddenly awlirl. Would the Elf recognize him? Jobin did not particularly know or like Rhyden Fabhcun. Aboard the *a'Maorga*, he had been somewhat inclined to agree with Hodder's point of view on things—that the Elf had bewitched them all somehow, cursed the ship and was up to no good. He had frankly been relieved to learn the Elf had been taken, sold at a catasta, and dismayed when Aedhir had announced his intentions to find him again—and ordered Jobin along for the ride.

He had only met Rhyden in passing, and the closest he had been to the Elf had been on the night of his disappearance, when Jobin had been among the crew to row Aedhir and the Elf from the *a'Maorga* to Capua. Aedhir had introduced them in turn to

the Elf and Jobin remembered Rhyden nodding his chin in cordial enough greeting, his eyes meeting Jobin's briefly. The Elf had seemed distracted and unhappy that night, though and Jobin had supposed Hodder and his rumors and innuendos had weighed heavily on him, regardless of whether or not they were true.

Would he remember me? he thought. *He has to—he has to recognize me. If they are treating him as a friend—if he tells them I am known to him, also a friend—then they will not hurt me, either!*

He turned his head over his shoulder, mumbling around his gag. He wanted to tell the Oirat man that he knew the Elf, if they would only take him to the Elf, everything would be explained.

He has to remember me, Jobin thought. *They will kill me if he does not. I will throw my arms around him, kiss his face, call him my bloody damn best friend—as dear to me as kin— if it will help. He has to remember me!*

In reply, the Oirat drove his elbow rudely, firmly between Jobin's shoulders, clearly inviting him to shut his mouth and keep his feet moving.

The Oirat man caught him by the shoulders, drawing him to a rough, unexpected halt. Jobin stumbled, startled from his thoughts, his frantic schemes. The Oirat shoved against him, and Jobin fell onto his knees, yelping around his gag as he hit the ground hard.

Please! he thought, quaking in terror. *Oh, please, do not let them kill me! Do not let them do something horrible to me...do not let them—!*

He moaned, flinching as he felt the Oirat's hands at the back of his head. He felt the blindfold loosen about his face, and then the Oirat drew it away. Jobin lowered his

head, wincing and squinting as sunlight, though muted through grey clouds, stung his eyes. He blinked, his eyes smarting with tears, and he risked a bleary, hesitant gaze ahead of him.

There was a boy standing before him, and Jobin blinked again in confusion. The kid was no more than twelve, if a day, small and scrawny. He wore an extraordinary costume, a long, intricately embroidered red robe, adorned with elaborate gold threading. Some sort of magnificent collar draped over his shoulders; a broad, stiff panel of hide adorned with silk and embroidering that framed his narrow form with wide, peaked corners. He wore panels of heavy, leather armor that had been trimmed in gold plates and a dome-shaped, gold helmet with a spray of bright red horse hair sprouting from the crest. He had long hair, shaved along his temples beneath the rim of his helmet and gathered in a long braid between his shoulders. He had a stern, imposing face, and even though he was a child, he stared at Jobin with such intensity and weight, that Jobin looked down at the ground, frightened anew.

Captain Fainne thought there was a child with them, he remembered. Aedhir had found some sort of little ball a few days ago along one of the sites where the Oirat had brought their longboats ashore. At least, it had looked like a ball to Jobin's eye, and Aedhir's as well, apparently, because the Captain had been troubled by the discovery. They had seen plenty of little footprints among the Oirats' in the mud and snow along their journey, like those made by a child's boots. *Looks like the Captain was right*, Jobin thought.

Aedhir had also thought a woman traveled with them. The Achaian whore he had bought in Capua had told Aedhir a woman had purchased the Elf at the catasta; Aedhir

had believed the Oirat came ashore periodically to allow the woman to relieve herself. Jobin looked up again, and indeed, there was a woman standing near the boy. She was beautiful, her brows drawn above her dark eyes, her large, full mouth turned in a frown as she regarded Jobin. She was dressed like the men who had abducted Jobin, except instead of scarlet vestments, her own vest was yellow beneath her unadorned leather armor. Another Oirat man stood beside her, quite possibly the largest, burliest man Jobin had ever seen. The man looked like he would be able to snap Jobin's neck between his forefinger and thumb with relative ease, and Jobin whimpered again, cringing.

The man behind him unfettered Jobin's gag. As the scrap of wool slipped away from his cheeks, the Oirat slapped him roughly against the back of the head, encouraging him to spit out the wad of fabric in his mouth. Jobin obliged, smacking his lips together. His tongue felt dry and swollen, and he breathed deeply through his mouth, grimacing at the stale, nasty flavor the gag left behind.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded sharply, drawing Jobin's startled, intimidated gaze. The kid bore one of those enormous, hooked swords against his hip, and he rested his gloved palm against the pommel, curling his fingertips lightly over the hilt. "Did Aulus Tertius send you? Did he think he could have me followed and I would not learn of it?"

Jobin blinked at him. "I..." he said, his voice hoarse and cracked. He had no idea who in the bloody wide Bith *Aulus Tertius* was. "I...please, I..."

“Speak!” the boy snapped, the furrow between his brows deepening with menace. He closed his hand about the hilt of his sword. “Answer me now, or I will open your throat myself!”

Jobin did not doubt him for a moment. Kid or not, here was obviously someone of authority among the rot group of barbarians. If his clothes did not give it away in full, or the commanding tone in his voice, then the fact that everyone seemed to defer to him, to keep a respectful distance from him, their eyes politely averted, certainly did. Jobin was not an idiot, and he lowered his face to the ground, holding his bound hands aloft in supplication.

“Please, my lord,” he said. His voice spewed out of him in a desperate, frantic rush. “Please, I do not know of whom you speak. My name is Jobin Dunster, my lord, and I am from Tiralainn. I am a friend of the Elf, my lord. Please, he knows me—he can tell you I speak the truth. Please, let me see the Elf—let him tell you who I am. I am his friend—he will know me.”

The boy was quiet for a long moment, but Jobin could feel the weight of his gaze boring into the cap of his skull. “Elf?” he said. The way he said the word was peculiar; it was as though it was unfamiliar to his tongue, and he pronounced it very carefully.

“Yes, my lord,” Jobin said, nodding his head. “I know Rhyden Fabhcun, the Elf. I am Jobin Dunster, my lord. I traveled with Lord Fabhcun from Tiralainn. I was part of a group searching for him, my lord, concerned for him. Please, he knows me. He will tell you who I am, that I am no threat to you, my lord.”

“I do not need someone to tell me you are no threat to me, you simpering rot,” the boy said. Jobin heard the hiss of steel as he drew his sword, and he froze, his eyes

flying wide, his voice and breath escaping him in a mewl as the curved tip of the blade caught him beneath the shelf of his chin.

“Please...!” he whimpered.

“He is from Tiralainn, my Kagan,” said the woman suddenly, softly. “*Tiralainn.*”

Whatever seemed to intrigue her about Tiralainn piqued the boy’s interest as well. He shoved the edge of his sword firmly against Jobin’s throat, forcing another soft cry from him. “Tiralainn—across the sea?” he said. “To the west? A realm across the sea?”

“Yes, my lord,” Jobin said, bewildered, quaking.

“*Fahv-coon,*” said the enormous man. His voice sounded soprano, sweet and trilling, nearly like a woman’s, and completely out of place issuing from his massive form. Jobin blinked at him, confused.

“*Fabhcun.* What does that mean?” the boy demanded of Jochin. “That word is unknown to me. What is *fabhcun*?”

“Falcon,” the big man said. “*Fahv-coon...* sounds like *falcon.*”

“Yes, that is what it means—*falcon,*” Jobin said, nodding his head. “That is his name. That is the Elf’s name. Rhyden Fabhcun. It means *falcon.*”

Why in the duchar do they not know this already? he thought. *They have traveled with him for weeks now, and they obviously speak the common tongue. How can the Oirat not know his bloody name?*

“A man-falcon,” the woman said, turning to look at the boy. “A man-falcon who is not a man at all, but something different, something more.”

“An Elf,” the boy hissed, and his brows furrowed deeply. He glared at Jobin.

“What is an Elf?”

Jobin stared at him, completely confounded. “He is an Elf, my lord,” he replied in helpless confusion. “He has not told you of this? He is a Gaeilge Elf. It is why his ears are pointed, my lord. He is an Elf. Surely he has told you...”

“Vachir told me he saw an unfamiliar in the company of the false one,” the woman murmured to the boy, words that made absolutely no sense to Jobin. “With ears like a wolf. Pointed, my Kagan. The man-falcon.”

The boy stared at Jobin, the edge of his sword not wavering in the least. “You know this Elf?” he asked. “This man-falcon, *Fahv-coon*. You know him?”

“Y-Yes,” Jobin whispered, bobbing his head. “I...I know him very well. He is dear to me, in fact. Most familiar, and...and fond, my lord.” He was babbling, not to mention lying, but he did not care. They were interested in the Elf, even if they seemed completely confused as to what an Elf was.

Maybe he is hurt, Jobin thought. Maybe has been unconscious all of this time, cannot speak to them, tell them of himself. Or maybe he is stubborn, and refuses to talk. It does not matter—they know of him.

“He could tell you himself, my lord,” Jobin said. “He would tell you I am his friend—a close friend, my lord. Very dear to his heart, as he is to mine, my lord. I...I would dare say as a brother, my lord, or at least kin...somewhat...a...a distant cousin, perhaps, or...or even—”

“Shut up,” the boy snapped, shoving the blade more roughly against Jobin’s throat. “He cannot tell me himself, you stupid rot, because he is not among us. How well could you know him, if you do not know this? He is with the Oirat.”

Jobin blinked at him, stunned and stricken. “Are...are you not...?” he stammered.

The boy blinked at him, realizing what Jobin had thought. He glanced toward the woman, and then he snickered. “You thought we were Oirat?” he asked. He laughed again, his humor shifting suddenly, seamlessly into new, bright wrath. He leaned forward without averting his blade and closed his fist in Jobin’s hair, wrenching his head backwards. “You are a stupid rot, are you not? You do not know me? You do not know who I am?”

His voice was sharp and loud, and Jobin cowered against his hand, shaking his head. “No, my lord,” he said. “Forgive me, my lord, I...I...”

“I bear the crown of stars—I am the true and sacred son of the seven!” the boy shouted, jerking his hand in Jobin’s hair again. “How can you not know me? I am the prince of the Dologhon! I am Duua’s heir—the descendent of the Great and Mighty! I am the Negh—lord of dragons and men, whose birth and triumph were heralded five thousand years ago! I am He Who Shall Pass, the marked one—the great promise! The restorer of the empire—the sacred and beloved son of ancient promises born among the stars!”

Jobin stared at him, shaking with fright, completely confused.

“He is Targutai Bokedei, the Kagan of Ulus,” said the woman to Jobin, her brows furrowed as the boy, Targutai released his brutal grip on Jobin’s hair. “And we are of his imperial Minghan—his people, the Khahl. We are sworn enemies of the Oirat. You

grovel before greatness, little man, and you are unworthy to gaze upon our promised son. Lower your eyes.”

The Oirat behind Jobin slapped him on the head again, and Jobin immediately dropped his gaze to the ground. His mind was spinning, processing what the woman had said. The Khahl. He knew that word, that name. Captain Fainne had mentioned it, as well, to the longboat crew. The Khahl were civilized cousins to the Oirat—and as the woman said, enemies to them. The Khahl were loyal to the Torachan empire, and they helped the Torachans in their efforts to battle and defeat the Oirat, who lived as rebels against imperial rule.

Jobin could think well and quickly on his feet, an inherent characteristic that had served him well in his lifetime. He opened his mouth, his mind already unfurling an idea to save his ass, and he spoke without lifting his eyes from his knees.

“Hoah—then praise the Good Mother I have found you, my lord,” he said. “For you...you are precisely the reason I am here. My Captain brought me with him from Capua in the hopes of begging audience with you, my lord, to plead for your gracious intercession and your help. The Oirat have stolen our friend from us, this Elf I spoke of, my dear and beloved friend. We were all of us sickened with fright and worry for him, my lord, and followed the Oirat, meaning to rescue him, to beg for your help in our efforts. My Captain and crew were attacked off of the southern shores of Sube, assailed by Enghan, my lord. All were killed, save for me, my lord. I managed to escape, and hoah, surely by divine providence alone have I been brought into your wise and gracious company, my good lord.”

“You were looking for me?” Targutai asked him.

Jobin nodded his head without looking up. “Yes, my lord,” he said. “We knew we had no hope of catching the Oirat, of finding them, or our friend, Rhyden Fabhcun, without your aid. Your deserved reputation, my lord, for firm and decisive leadership precedes you, and my Captain had every confidence that you would be able to accomplish in swift measure what we were helpless to see through—the rescue of our friend.”

Targutai looked at him for a long moment, and then he shoved the blade of his sword firmly against Jobin’s neck. “You are lying.”

“No...” Jobin whimpered. “No, please, my lord, I...I swear to you, I...”

“My Kagan,” said the woman, draping her hand against the boy’s sleeve. “If I may beseech you for a moment’s counsel...?”

Targutai glanced at her, and then glowered at Jobin. He lowered his sword, and Jobin heaved a sigh of breathless relief. Targutai walked away from him as the woman guided him a few steps, her hand yet upon his arm. She lowered her head and murmured to him. Jobin strained his ears to listen, but could not tell what she said. After a few moments, Targutai turned and tromped back toward Jobin.

“You say this Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun is dear to you,” he said.

“Yes, my lord,” Jobin said, nodding his head, staring at the ground.

“He knows you, then? He would know your face?”

“Yes,” Jobin whispered, bobbing his chin.

“He is leading them to something,” Targutai said. “The Elf is leading the Oirat into the mountains to find something.”

Jobin blinked in sudden realization. *They want it, too*, he thought. It had not occurred to him to wonder what the Khahl were doing so far to the west in Ulus; Aedhir had explained that they lived to the east, in a northern territory called the Taiga. The Kagan lived in the capital city of Kharhorin, many long miles inland from Qoyina Bay. *Captain Fainne was right all along. The Oirat have found something in the mountains, something only the Elf can claim for them—and the Khahl want it, too.*

Whatever the Oirat had stumbled upon, whatever they hoped Rhyden could open for them, it was obviously something more than weapons. The Khahl were allies of the empire, but more than this, they did not look to Jobin's observation like they would find any benefit from a hidden cache of ancient Dwarf weapons. The Khahl were well-equipped, well-armed and sufficiently armored. The Oirat might have been eager to find a stockpile of old weapons to wield against the empire, but the Khahl had no need.

Whatever it is, Jobin thought. *It is something very important to them.*

I bear the crown of stars—I am the true and sacred son of the seven, Targutai had declared. *I am the Negh—lord of dragons and men, whose birth and triumph were heralded five thousand years ago! I am He Who Shall Pass, the marked one—the great promise! The restorer of the empire!*

Something very important, and very ancient, if they have been waiting five thousand years for its discovery, Jobin thought.

“He is leading them to something,” Targutai told him again. “And it belongs to me. I have no intention of letting them find it first.”

What is it, you little rot bastard? Jobin thought. *What do you want so badly?*

“The Elf will come to you,” Targutai said. “Will he not?”

Whatever it is, they want it, too, Jobin thought, staring at his knees. *And as long as they think Rhyden can get it—and that I can get Rhyden for them—I will be alright.*

“Of course he will, my lord,” Jobin said. “I told you, Rhyden Fabhcun is like a brother to me. He will rush to me from any company, joyously...gratefully, my lord.”

Targutai shoved his sword back into his sheath. “If you are lying to me, I will cut you open from ear to pelvis.”

“I...I am not lying, my lord,” Jobin said.

“Good,” Targutai said. “By now the Oirat have reached the mouth of the Toda and are well underway. We are leaving shortly to follow them—and you will come with us.”

Jobin looked down at the ground, trembling. “Yes, my lord,” he whispered. “Thank...thank you, my lord.”

Chapter Six

It took four days for the Enghan bergelmir cavalry to cross the Keiliselgr Fjell north across Sube and reach the coastal *byr*, or village of Lith. The village rested on the shores of the Holavik Bay, a small cluster of fifty thatched-roof homes, barns and simple, one-storied buildings. Two wooden docks thrust out from the land into the bay, and were lined with fettered, moored knarrs and smaller fishing vessels. Lith was encompassed by a high perimeter wall, a steeply sloping mound of rocks, timbers and compressed earth deliberately forming a ring around the village, with only two points of passage hollowed in its measure.

Aedhir could not see Lith as they rode down from the cragged foothills toward the water, because his eyes were blindfolded, as they had been since leaving the battleground to the south. However, he caught the fragrance of the sea against his face in a slight, frigid wind, and lifted his chin, turning his face toward the scent. He could smell distant wood smoke mingling with the smell of salt and sea, and heard an excited murmur ripple among the riders around him.

“It is Lith,” Eirik said from behind him. The Enghan Hersir had taken personal custody of him, making Aedhir ride before him astride the brawny shoulders of his bergelmir. Like his crewmen, Aedhir’s hands were bound before him, along with the blindfold wrapped around his face. He had spent the better part of the journey squirming restlessly, futilely against his bonds.

Normally the bitter smell of the sea would have pleased Aedhir and brought to his mind a sense of peace he sometimes abandoned while on land. This time, however, he felt nothing but dismay.

We have reached the sea again, he thought. *We have made it across Sube to the northern coast*. There would be no going back now, he realized. Even if any evidence remained untouched by the tides to mark the Oirat's grounding along the shore of Tolui Bay, they would be long gone and into the Khar mountains by now. He had lost any hope of finding them—or of finding Rhyden. *I have failed him*, he thought, stricken.

“Why does this man mean so much that you would see such sacrifice and risk to rescue him?” Eirik had asked him early in their journey, leaning over Aedhir's shoulder, his voice low against Aedhir's ear.

Aedhir had shrugged his shoulder, jerking away from Eirik. *Because he saved my life, you bastard*, he had thought. He had thought of the night the storm had ravaged the *a'Maorga*, of Rhyden tackling him, knocking him from the path of the collapsing main mast. Rhyden had used his own body to shield Aedhir from falling debris. He remembered Rhyden's soft, sharp cries against his ear as he had been struck repeatedly, injured by collapsing rigging lines and blocks. He had remembered Rhyden sitting in the Pauper's Pyre at Capua, telling Aedhir that he had sent a message by courier back to Tiralainn, a letter to the King that stated he had privately commissioned the *a'Maorga*, and the services of its crew. Rhyden had given him twenty thousand marks to pay Aedhir's crew, and had listened to none of Aedhir's protests.

Elves could not lie by their natures. The money Rhyden had offered made his letter to Kierken somewhat true, but Aedhir had realized all along that this was likely the closest Rhyden had ever come in his life to defying what was inherent in his character.

He lied for me, he had thought.

Why, Rhyden? Aedhir had asked him in Capua.

Rhyden had smiled at him again. *Because you are my friend, Aedhir*, he had replied.

“Rhyden is a good man,” Aedhir had told Eirik quietly, closing his eyes and lowering his head. “He is probably the truest friend I have ever known.”

And I have failed him, he thought again in shame and sorrow as the perfume of the sea fluttered in the wind against him.

“Do you see it, Bjarki?” asked a voice from the left of Eirik’s bergelmir. Eirik’s sons rode together alongside their father; his eldest, seventeen-year-old Einar, and his youngest, Bjarki, who was eleven. “Do you see it there? It is Lith,” Einar said.

Einar was a *Styrimathr*, or leader, among the Enghan *Seggr*, or younger warrior’s sect. Eirik had done his best to explain some about his people to Aedhir during their journey, and Aedhir had done his best to listen. As they had traveled northward, a sort of mutual respect had developed between Aedhir and Eirik, an understanding of one another’s circumstances, though Aedhir would not go so far as to say he liked Eirik—or called him a friend.

As Eirik explained it, each Enghan community, or *kyn*, was governed by a *Hersir*, or leader, and generally comprised of three to five small, individual byrs, or villages. These villages had their own groups of warriors, and all served the leader of Engjold, a

man named Fjolnir Itreker, whose title of *Konung* was equivalent to the Pater Patriae in Torach, or the King in Tiralainn. The Enghan army, collectively called the *Herr*, were divided by kyn groups and led by *Fylkir*, or commanders, with smaller internal brigades led by *Styrimathr*—the equivalent of first officers in the Crown Navy. Kyn sub-sects of the Herr were made up of *Rekk*r warriors, those with the most experience, and the Seggr—boys and young men of the kyn who were learning the art of warfare. The Seggr did not fight generally; they were responsible for the collection of bodies, weapons and supplies after battles, the setting up and maintenance of camps, and day-to-day activities to help the Herr warriors when they traveled far from home and into battle.

Eirik was the Fylkir for his kyn, the *Rikr*. He was also the leader, or Hersir of the Rikr clan now, albeit unwillingly, as he had admitted frankly to Aedhir. He had not wanted his father's position of authority among his people.

"*Kaeti!*" Bjarki exclaimed happily, his voice high and eager. The assault against the Torachans had been his first taste of battle, although he had remained many miles away during the engagement, at the Enghan's camp with the other Seggr. Einar had ridden with his father and the Herr before; Eirik had told Aedhir that this had marked his first actual experience fighting among the ranks of the Rekk

r, and that the boy had fared admirably.

Eirik had another child, a daughter named Arnora, who was eighteen. Eirik's wife had died while giving birth to Bjarki, and so he had explained it was only Arnora and his widowed mother, Halla who awaited their return at the home of Halla's brother in Lith.

"Do you think Arnora has supper ready, Einar?" Bjarki asked his brother.

Aedhir heard Einar laugh. "Let us hope not, Bjarki," he said. "And that Mothir Halla has beaten her to it."

Aedhir felt Eirik's hands against the back of his head, and he flinched reflexively. "It is alright," Eirik said, loosening the knotted scrap of fabric around Aedhir's eyes. He drew the blindfold away from Aedhir's face, and Aedhir squinted, turning his cheek toward his shoulder as sunlight met his eyes for the first time in four days. It was late afternoon, nearly evening, but even this dim and dusky glare pained him, and he sucked in a hissing breath as his eyes smarted.

"We are home," Eirik told him, as Aedhir risked a bleary glance ahead of him. He could see the earthen fortifications surrounding the byr as they approached. They followed a narrow road, little more than tropped earth and flattened, snow-dusted witch grass toward one of the openings in the wall. Through this slim margin, Aedhir caught a glimpse of small houses, with faint clouds of smoke wafting above the low-pitched peaks of grass roofs.

"Lith is part of the *Berg'kyn*," Eirik said. "My uncle Hamal's people. You will stay with me. My family and I share a house with my mother's brother. It may be crowded, but you should be comfortable enough among us for the night, at least. We will be leaving tomorrow for Elbeuf."

"I want to see my daughter," Aedhir said, lowering his head again, the light making his eyes water, his head ache. His brows drew together and he craned his wrists against the confines of his ropes. "I want to see my son."

"You will," Eirik said. "There are some matters I would discuss with you first, and I am sure you will want to bathe, change your clothes."

“I want to see my children,” Aedhir said, the furrow between his brows deepening. He glanced over his shoulder at Eirik. “I will discuss nothing with you until I know they are alright.”

Eirik smiled at him, clapping his hand against Aedhir’s shoulder. If nothing else, it seemed to Aedhir that Eirik empathized with his fierce love and protectiveness of Pryce and Aelwen. Eirik was a father himself, and obviously understood. “Alright, then,” he said. “I will arrange to have them brought to you.”

As they neared the earthen wall surrounding Lith, Eirik spurred his heels against his bergelmir’s flank, and the weasel loped ahead of Einar and Bjarki, darting gracefully to the front of the Herr ranks. Eirik held up his hand, his fingers closed together in a fist, and as Aedhir scanned the crest of the wall, he could see at least ten men poised along the top, with bows in hand, arrows nocked and aimed toward them.

“Heilir!” Eirik called out loudly, his mouth spread in a broad grin. “That er oss!”

At his cry, the men along the fortification lowered their bows and began to cheer.

“That er Eirik!” Aedhir heard one of them shout out. “That er Hanninn!”

The Enghan warriors called back to them, whooping loudly, exuberantly and thrusting their fists skyward in exuberant greeting. As they passed through the gate, following the muddy road toward the broad basin of the Holavik Bay, people began emerging from the closely arranged huts and houses. Women with babies tucked against their hips, men too old to fight, and children too young for the Seggr came out and darted into the street, all of them crying out happily and cheering.

Aedhir stared around him in amazement. The walls of the Enghan homes were made of wood planks and sod, with long buttress beams extending from the roof eaves

to the ground to support the buildings. The homes had no windows and the roofs were thatch, with no chimneys. He could see depressions in the centers of each roof, large holes cut into the reeds and lumber to act as vents through which smoke curled skyward.

The Enghan people were dressed in colorful clothes; boys and older men in long, wool tunics with broad, open necklines that fell to their knees and were worn belted about their waists. They wore lighter undershirts beneath these, and pants that they either wore tucked and strapped into their boots, like the Herr warriors, or unfettered and uncuffed to their ankles. Young boys wore caps on their heads, panels of colorful fabric stitched together, coming to listing points above the crests of their pates. The women wore long woolen dresses that fell to their ankles. Some wore these with bright sashes about their waists, while others wore them loose. They all wore long-hemmed aprons of some sort; twin panels of fabric draped over their torsos, adorned along the trim with colorful embroidery, secured at their shoulders with large, gold brooches and fastened at their hips by a network of ties. Some wore their heads bare, with their hair wound in elaborate plaits bundled close to their necks, while most wore pale scarves over their pates, gathered in ties behind their ears.

They surged around the riders, some of the weeping, all of them crying out and beaming, their hands outstretched for husbands, fathers, brothers, friends. Aedhir watched one of the riders to his left lean precariously in his saddle to catch a young woman about the waist as she leapt for him, crying out his name. She burst into tears as he drew her across his lap, then caught his face between her hands and kissed him deeply.

“We have been gone nearly two weeks,” Eirik told Aedhir. “Long enough for them to become frightened that something had gone awry—and long enough for word to reach them about the coming legions.”

Just as Thorir had told them at the southern battleground, Eirik had explained that three thousand Torachan soldiers had been reported leaving Enthimork to the east, advancing across the Merki isthmus and into Sube. The mountains and the winter weather would keep them delayed long enough for the Enghan to flee Lith and travel deeper among the peaks, to their fortified city of Elbeuf to the west, but the empire was coming nonetheless.

Aedhir could see wagons and carts parked outside of some of the cottages, in the small, fenced yards surrounding the humble houses. The carts were packed modestly with supplies, all bundled and neatly arranged as families prepared for the next day’s exodus. The Enghan were a transitory people accustomed to moving frequently; their homes were comfortable, but not made with sturdier materials, such as stone for this reason.

Aedhir looked all around him as from over his shoulder, Eirik called out cheerfully to friends and familiar faces, reaching out to clasp hands or brush passing fingertips in fleeting but fond greeting. The Enghan peered curiously at Aedhir, their expressions wavering between uncertainty and inquisitiveness. Even with Torachan legions periodically advancing into their territory, it was likely most of them had never seen a Median before, and they stared at him, their eyes wide as they marveled over his dark skin.

Eirik and Einar reined their bergelmirs into a broad yard flanking one of the thatched roof houses. The yard was ringed by a split-rail fence that encompassed a small barn, a hen house and a square of barren, exposed earth, mulched with dried pine needles that obviously served as a vegetable garden in summer months.

“Bjarki, see to the bergelmirs,” Eirik said to his youngest son.

“Yes, Fathir,” Bjarki said.

Einar was a tall young man, lean and russet-haired, like his father. He swung one of his long legs around the left shoulder of his bergelmir and dropped easily to the ground. He reached up with both hands, helping his brother down, and then paused for a moment, hooking his fingers behind the bergelmir’s ear and scratching. The weasel made a low, contented rumbling sound in its throat, canting its head to encourage Einar in his efforts.

The rear door of the house opened as Eirik dismounted from his saddle, and a young woman ran outside. “Fathir!” she cried, dashing toward Eirik, her eyes wide and bright, her mouth open in a smile. “Einar! Bjarki! You have returned!”

“Yes, Arnora,” Eirik told her, laughing as he caught her in his arms. She threw her arms about his neck and he hoisted her feet from the ground in a hug. The girl squealed as he spun her about.

“I have worried!” she said as he set her on the ground once more. Einar strode toward her, grinning broadly, his brow arched. The girl, Arnora, scurried behind her father, laughing at his approach. “Keep back—you smell like dung!” she cried. “Filthy as a wretch, stinking like rot! Do not touch me, Einar!”

“You missed me, you wench,” he said, ducking around Eirik and grabbing her by the wrist. She pretended to struggle as he pulled her toward him, hugging her, planting a loud, wet kiss against her cheek. “And you worried for me, too—tell me you did.”

“I will not!” Arnora cried, squirming and laughing as he kissed her again. “You are disgusting, Einar—let me go!”

She caught sight of Aedhir, and froze, her eyes widening in sudden trepidation. She clasped her brother by the hand and looked at her father, anxiously.

“We have guests,” Eirik said. He reached up, helping Aedhir dismount from the bergelmir. “Arnora, this is Captain Aedhir Fainne. He is a visitor to Engjold from the west, across the sea. Captain, this is my daughter, Arnora.”

“My lady,” Aedhir said, nodding once politely.

Arnora blinked at him, realizing that his hands were bound. “Heill,” she offered in greeting after a hesitant moment, turning her eyes down toward her shoes.

“He is from Alfheim, Arnora,” Bjarki told her, eagerly, and Arnora blinked at Eirik again, startled.

“He will be staying with us tonight,” Eirik said, as he began to unload bundled blankets and waterskins from his saddle. “And he will be coming with us to Elbeuf in the morning.” He slung a heavy pouch over his shoulder, cradling the rest of his supplies in the crook of his left elbow. He took Aedhir by the arm and started walking toward the house. “Come,” he said.

“I want to see my children,” Aedhir said, shrugging his shoulder and pulling loose of Eirik’s grasp. Eirik paused and turned to him, meeting his gaze. Aedhir frowned at him, his hands folding into fists. “Aelwen and Pryce. I want to see them now.”

“I told you that you could,” Eirik said. “I am a man of my word. Einar, find Blakinn and Ottarr. Tell them to bring their wards with them, to come at once.”

“Ja, Fathir,” Einar said, nodding his head. He offered his sister’s hand a reassuring squeeze and then broke into a wide-gaited sprint, running around the side of the house toward the street.

“Arnora, help your brother with the bergelmirs,” Eirik said, nodding toward Bjarki, who had taken the pair of weasels by the reins and was attempting to lead the large animals to the barn. “Where is Mothir Halla?”

“She is inside with uncle Beinir, Fathir,” Arnora said. “Seeing to supper.”

“Kaeti,” Bjarki said. Given the frequency the boy uttered this word, it seemed to Aedhir to be the Enghan equivalent of *good* or *splendid*. He grinned mischievously at his sister. “Einar will be pleased then.”

The interior of the house was dimly lit and cozy, a long, solitary room broken only by a partial wall toward the rear of the chamber that protruded halfway across the width of the building to designate a small, almost separate chamber.

The floor was dirt, covered with a loose spread of thin, dried reeds. In the center of the room, a long, stone hearth had been built. A heavy iron kettle hung from a length of chain, suspended from the ceiling above one end of the hearth, with the rest open, a bed of glowing coals stoked and tended within to fill the house with warmth. Long wooden crates framed the room, serving as both benches and storage space. To the right of the door, a large loom stood propped against the wall, a panel of unfinished wool fabric drawn taut between the beams of the wooden frame. Damp clothes had

been hung to dry along a line of hemp strung between the ceiling rafters; waterskins, nets filled with root vegetables and hide pouches of assorted sizes also dangled down. The walls had been decorated with only a pair of shields, the sort carried by the Enghan Herr—twin circles of wood painted bright red, capped with iron. Two metal lamp stands stood at each end of the main chamber, cradling small oil lamps that offered faint but cheery glow to the room.

An old man sat on one of the benches along the left wall, darning a stocking. An older woman stood in the middle of the chamber before the hearth. She leaned over, lifting the lid on an iron skillet to inspect the progress of something cooking on a metal grill above the coals as Eirik and Aedhir walked inside. She turned at the sound of their footsteps.

“Eirik!” she exclaimed, shuffling toward him, her hands outstretched. “Praise Tyr, you have returned!” She clapped her palms against Eirik’s cheeks. He stood a good head taller than her, and lowered his face so that she could kiss his mouth. Tears gleamed in her eyes. “You are well, then?” she asked. “Unharmed? Einar and Bjarki?”

“We are all fine, M’ma,” Eirik said. He looked over his shoulder toward the old man. “Heill, Beinir,” he called out in a loud voice.

The old man blinked up at him, as if noticing him for the first time. His hands paused in his sewing, and he grinned broadly. Aedhir could see he was missing all but two of his front teeth. “Eirik!” the man, Beinir, said. He set aside the stocking and rose slowly to his feet, as though the creeping pace as his joints unfurled was the best he could manage. “Heill, sveinn.”

Eirik clasped hands with the old man and smiled fondly at him. "How did the boy fare?" Beinir asked.

"Einar did well, Beinir," Eirik said. "You would be proud of him. He handled his ax like a man twice his years."

"More Torachans are coming," Beinir told him, his expression grim. "Three thousand strong crossing Merki from the east into the fjell. Word reached us three days ago."

"I know," Eirik said, nodding. "Thorir's scouts from the east saw them in Enthimork moving west. We will leave with the new dawn for Elbeuf. The Torachans to the south will not bother us again. Vidar blessed our efforts. None remain."

"Praises be," Halla said, lifting her fist and shaking it toward the ceiling. She looked at Aedhir, noticing his bound hands and her brows pinched together beneath the edge of her head scarf. Her thin lips turned down in a frown. "What is this you have brought with you?"

"This is Captain Aedhir Fainne, M'ma," Eirik said. "He will be staying with us tonight. Have you made enough supper for guests?"

"No one goes hungry in this house," Halla replied. "We will make do." She frowned again at Aedhir. "Hann er brunskinn." Aedhir did not need to be familiar or fluent in the Enghan tongue to decipher what she said: *He is brown-skinned.*

"Hann er mjoksiglandi," Eirik told her, placing his hand against her shoulder. "*Far-traveling*, M'ma, from the west."

"He is Torachan," Halla said.

"No, M'ma," Eirik replied. "He says he is from Alfheim."

Halla and Beinir both blinked at Aedhir, visibly startled. “Hann velar,” Halla said. “That er vel.”

“It is not a trick, M’ma,” Eirik said patiently. He walked over to a bench and dropped his gear.

“He is dark-skinned with soot,” Halla said. She hooked her forefingers in the air at Aedhir in a peculiar, warding gesture. “From the fires of the Vanaheim forges. He is Lopt in disguise, come to trick us.”

Eirik took Aedhir’s elbow and led him across the room. “He is not Lopt in disguise, M’ma,” he said, shaking his head and sighing wearily. “He is dark-skinned from birth—a man, the same as I.”

“Lopt wears the cloak of a man’s form to walk among us,” Halla insisted. “He is the mischief god meant to lead us astray and to our deaths.”

“There will be no more of such talk,” Eirik said, his voice growing sharp. He paused in mid-stride and turned to his mother. “And you will not repeat such things beyond these walls. While he is among us, he is my guest, and under my protection.”

Halla blinked at him but said no more. She pressed her lips together and turned, shuffling back toward the fire, muttering to herself, flapping her forked fingers in the air repeatedly.

“She is superstitious,” Eirik said to Aedhir, looking sheepish. “Pay her no mind.”

He motioned with his hand toward a bench and Aedhir sat against it. Eirik looked at him for a long moment and then drew his dagger from a sheath against his belt. He slipped the edge of the blade against Aedhir’s ropes and began to saw through them.

When the bindings snapped free, Aedhir grasped his wrists lightly, each in turn, rubbing them with his hands.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Eirik nodded.

“I will not hurt your family,” Aedhir told him. “I will not run.”

“I know you will not,” Eirik said. “I suspect you would as soon run yourself through with this blade as risk harm to your children, your friends, or abandon them.”

Aedhir met his gaze, trying to decide if Eirik offered thinly veiled threat or not. “I would, yes.”

“Mothir Halla!” Bjarki cried happily, racing across the threshold from the yard. He ran toward his grandmother, hugging her fiercely.

“Heill, child,” Halla said. She cupped her hands against his ears and kissed his pate.

“We stopped the Torachans. Did Fathir tell you?” Bjarki asked, squirming and ducking away from her. “Einar got to fight, too. He rode out with the Rekk.”

“Yes, I have heard,” Halla said.

“Did you stable the bergelmirs?” Eirik asked his son. He walked away from Aedhir toward the hearth, unbuckling his belt, loosening it from around his waist.

“Ja, Fathir,” Bjarki said.

“You gave them food and water?” Eirik asked, glancing over his shoulder, his brow raised. “Unsaddled them and removed their bridles?”

“Yes,” Bjarki said, nodding.

“Brushed their coats down, checked their paws?”

Bjarki blinked, looking down at his boots, and Eirik frowned slightly. “Bjarki, they can get burrs and stones between their pads. It hurts them. Kindly check their paws and brush them down good—get their underbellies.”

“Ja, Fathir,” Bjarki said, his shoulders hunching as he sighed, put-upon.

“Where is your sister?” Eirik asked, walking toward the small room at the rear of the house, holding his belt in his hand. “I told her to help you.”

“She started talking instead out in the yard by the fence,” Bjarki said. “Thorkatla, Aesa and Veny have come.” He looked up at his grandmother. “They are talking about the Elves.”

“They are not Elves, Bjarki,” Eirik said, disappearing behind the half-wall.

“Elves?” Halla asked.

“They are not Elves, M’ma,” Eirik said. “They are men. All of them—men. Do not go telling people they are Elves, Bjarki.”

“All of them,” Halla repeated, frowning at Aedhir.

“Thorir caught ten of them,” Bjarki said. “And there were more besides, Mothir Halla, but they got away on their boat.”

“You brought ten strangers to our byr?” Halla asked, turning to call to Eirik. “They could be Torachan spies. They could be imps of Lopt, come to deceive us.”

“They are strangers, yes,” Eirik said. He stepped out from behind the wall momentarily. He had stripped off his tunics and was in the processing of washing up.

“But they are not Torachan spies or imps.”

“Thorir says they are Torachans,” Bjarki said.

“Thorir is mistaken, then,” Eirik told him. “And I believe I said for you to go to the barn, Bjarki, and tend to those bergelmirs.”

Bjarki sighed again, woefully. “Ja,” he muttered, turning for the door.

Two large men stepped through the doorway, and Bjarki drew back, momentarily startled. The two Enghan led Pryce and Aelwen stumbling along with them. Aedhir stood when he saw the pair and watched the frightened confusion in their faces shift to relief as they caught sight of him.

“Father!” Aelwen cried, shrugging her shoulders mightily to loosen her captor’s hands. He released her and she bolted forward. Her hands were still bound, but she hooked her arms over Aedhir’s head, hugging him. He felt her cheek press against his, her breath shudder against his ear, and he held her, lifting her feet from the ground.

“Aelwen,” he whispered, stroking his hand against her tumbled hair. She looked weary and disheveled, but unharmed. He canted his face and kissed her cheek. “Are you alright? Did they hurt you? By my breath, if any of them touched you...”

“I am alright,” she said. “I have worried for you, but I am alright.”

Pryce came to him, and Aedhir wrapped his arm around his neck, drawing Pryce against his left shoulder. He hugged them both, with Wen huddled against his right, and he draped his hand against Pryce’s hair, kissing the young man’s ear.

“Are you alright?” Pryce asked.

“Yes,” Aedhir said. *Hoah, at this moment, I could not fare much better,* he thought, closing his eyes against grateful tears. He cupped his hand against Pryce’s cheek and studied the wound on his temple, frowning. It had closed; the Enghan had

put some kind of herbal salve on it, but it remained discolored and bruised, painful in the appearance. Pryce was pale and haggard, his face draped in exhausted shadows.

“Pryce...” Aedhir said softly, anguished.

“It is alright,” Pryce said. He drew near to Aedhir, lifting his chin to whisper. “We have reached Holavik Bay.”

“I know,” Aedhir nodded.

“They mean to bring us west, I think,” Pryce said. “To the Chagan Sea.”

“A city called Elbeuf,” Aedhir said. “I know.”

“They say the empire is coming to the south, Father,” Wen breathed. “Across the isthmus from Enthimork.”

“If we could reach them, they might help us,” Pryce said. He glanced at Wen, meeting her gaze. “I loosened Wen’s knots yesterday—I could get them undone with a little more time, I know I could, and she could untie mine. We could leave, turn back toward Qoyina and—”

“No,” Aedhir whispered. “It is too dangerous.”

“We could make it, Aedhir,” Pryce insisted. “I know it. We could—”

“No,” Aedhir said again, firmly. “I will deal with this, Pryce. Do not do anything.”

“But, Father—” Wen began.

“That is an order—both of you,” Aedhir said. He looked between them both gravely, his voice soft but stern. “Do not do anything. Eirik is their leader and he is beginning to trust me. I can reason with him. If you try to escape, it will only ruin that. Give me time, let me talk to him. I can convince him to release us.”

Pryce looked at him doubtfully.

“These are not bad men or savages,” Aedhir said. “They are frightened and desperate, but not without their senses. I can reason with them. I know I can, Pryce.”

Pryce blinked at him, his brows drawing together, his mouth set in an unhappy line. He nodded his head reluctantly. “Alright, Aedhir,” he whispered.

Aedhir was allowed to visit with Aelwen and Pryce only a few more brief moments, and then the Enghan who had escorted them into Eirik’s home seized hold of them once more, drawing them away.

“No,” Pryce said, squirming against his captor. “No—!”

“No—!” Aedhir cried, stricken, reaching for Aelwen’s outstretched hands as she was pulled backward.

“Father!” she cried, her eyes round and alarmed.

“Let them go,” Aedhir said, closing his hands into fists and striding toward the pair of Enghan. He turned to look over his shoulder as Eirik emerged from the back room, washed and changed into a fresh pair of tunics and trousers. “Let them stay with me.”

“They will be nearby,” Eirik said. “And safe, Captain Fainne. I give you my word.”

Aedhir met his gaze. He could argue with Eirik, protest with all of the fierce vehemence that had seized his heart, but he knew if he did, it would damage whatever fledgling regard had been established between the two. Eirik was offering his word; he was asking Aedhir to trust him, and if Aedhir refused, he might lose any hope he had of convincing the Enghan Hersir to free them. Aedhir loosened his hands, unfolding his fingers, forcing his brows to unknit.

“It is alright,” he said to Pryce and Wen. “Do not fight them.”

“Aedhir...” Pryce said, shrugging his shoulders against the Enghan’s grasp.

Aedhir turned to him. “That is an order, Lieutenant,” he said as Pryce stared at him helplessly. *It will be alright, Pryce. I will get us out of this. By my breath, lad, I will.*

Pryce blinked at him. “Yes, sir,” he said, falling still.

Eirik led Aedhir into the small rear room as his mother finished supper preparations. There was a single bed in the narrow chamber, a square wooden frame against the wall filled with dried, aromatic heather, with woolen blankets and furs draped over it. There was a small crate on the floor that served as a washbasin. Eirik had placed a large bowl atop it, along with some neatly folded linens. A waterskin sat on the floor beside the crate, and Aedhir noticed a clean set of tunics and a pair of pants laid out on the bed.

“You may bathe, if you would like,” Eirik said, nodding at the basin. “Some fresh clothes, if you would change.”

“Thank you,” Aedhir said. Eirik turned and walked away, granting him the modicum of privacy the short length of wall offered. “And thank you for letting me see them,” Aedhir added, giving the man pause.

Eirik nodded again. “You are welcome, Captain Fainne,” he said, walking away and leaving Aedhir alone.

Aedhir shouldered his way out of the Enghan overcoat he wore. Eirik had called it a kyrtil; it was made of heavy, furlined hide. He stripped over the tunics beneath it, and knelt before the wash basin. He poured water from the pouch into the bowl, cupped his hands together and splashed water on his face.

“Did you finish with the bergelmirs?” he heard Eirik ask as the door squeaked on its hinges, and Bjarki’s small, hurried footsteps pattered against the floor.

“Yes, sir,” Bjarki replied. “Einar helped me. He said he would brush them if I cleaned their paws.”

“Where is Arnora?” Eirik asked.

“Still talking at the fence,” Bjarki said.

“There is supper to tend to,” Eirik said, sounding displeased. “She should be inside.”

“She should be married by now, a girl her age,” Halla said. “Then she could talk at her own fence, neglect her own family’s supper.”

Aedhir dunked one of the linens into the washbasin and began to scrub at his bare torso with it, rubbing it beneath his arms, along the muscled plain of his stomach.

“Fathir, why does the Captain call the one man his son?” Bjarki asked. Aedhir paused in his cleansing, the linen in his hand. “His skin is dark. His hair is not fair. He calls him his son, but Thorir said he did not know his own daughter—and she looks like him. Did Lopt play a trick on him, do you think?”

“No, Bjarki, Lopt did not play a trick on him,” Eirik said quietly. He had asked Aedhir about this as they had made their way north from Sube, and Aedhir had explained to him. “The young man’s parents died when he was young, your age. He was all alone, and the Captain has taken care of him. His own daughter was kept from him, and he did not get to see her for a very long time.”

“That is sad,” Bjarki said after a long, thoughtful moment. Aedhir could not help but to smile and the boy’s earnest naiveté.

“Yes, Bjarki, it is,” Eirik said, gently. “But he loves them both, like I love you and Einar and Arnora. We will be respectful to them, courteous while they are among us, as we would hope they might treat us were we to visit their home.”

“How long will they be among us?” Bjarki asked.

“I...I do not know, Bjarki,” Eirik said, sounding uncomfortable. “Why do you not go outside and find your brother and sister? It is time for supper.”

Aedhir heard the sound of the front door opening on its hinges again, followed by a flutter of voices from the far end of the house.

“Where is Captain Fainne?” he heard Odhran ask, his voice sharp and bewildered. “You said you were taking us to him!”

“Odhran...” Aedhir breathed, his eyes flying wide.

“Hvar er varr felagi?” he heard Tacita say. “Varr vinn?”

“Tacita—!” Aedhir dropped the washrag and sprang to his feet. It had been four days since he had last seen Tacita. The Enghan had gone to great lengths to keep all of his crewmen separated from one another during their journey. He had one fleeting moment to speak with her before leaving the battleground, before the Enghan had split them up and delivered them among the cavalry ranks for transport. His hands had been bound before him, but he had reached up, cradling her face between his palms. She had draped her hands against his and met his gaze, her blue eyes wide and filled with anxiety.

“Do not be frightened,” he had whispered, pressing his forehead against hers. “I will not let them hurt you, Tacita.”

“I do not think they mean to hurt us,” she had told him softly, her breath brushing against his mouth. “I...I do not know what they want, but if they meant harm to us, they would have done it by now.”

Tacita had lifted her chin, letting her lips dance lightly against his. Aedhir had drawn her against him and kissed her; it had not been impulsive longing on his part, but rather something that felt natural to him, right within his heart and mind. It had been so long—not since his youth, when he had first fallen in love with Iona—that he had felt such a close and comforting bond with a woman, and he had wanted to kiss Tacita, had meant to for many long days now. When Tacita pressed her mouth against his, her voice soft in her throat as he had brushed the tip of his tongue against hers, he had known that she felt the same.

“I will not let them hurt you, Tacita,” he had whispered again.

He rushed around the corner of the wall and saw her. Tacita and Odhran had been brought in the company two Rekk soldiers, as well as Thorir and Kolbrun. The Enghan man who had escorted Tacita into the house had made her sit on one of the benches. He kept his hand against her shoulder to hold her in place. When she saw Aedhir, her eyes widened, and she jumped up, jerking away from the Enghan.

“Aedhir!” she cried. She moved to run for him, but the Enghan clamped his hand against her elbow. Tacita struggled against him, her hands bound, her brows furrowed. “Let go of me!” she snapped.

“Let her go,” Aedhir said, striding briskly across the room. He glanced at Eirik. “Tell him to let her go.”

“Thu leysar hana, Viparr,” Eirik said, and the Enghan man, Viparr, turned loose of Tacita.

She ran toward Aedhir, and he caught her in his arms as she hooked her bound hands about his neck. He held her fiercely, feeling her tremble against him. “Tacita...” he whispered.

“You are alright,” she said, kissing his ear, her hands splayed in his short-cropped hair. “I...I was so worried for you...you are alright...!”

“I am fine,” he said softly, and when he let his mouth settle gently against hers, Tacita raised her chin to meet him, kissing him deeply. “Are you alright?” he whispered, cupping her face in his hands. She nodded, her eyes glistening with tears.

“I am better now,” she told him, managing a smile. Aedhir smiled at her, kissed her again, and then held her, drawing her against his shoulder.

“Hoah, as am I,” he breathed, stroking her hair. He looked beyond Tacita’s shoulder toward Odhran. “You are alright, lad?”

Odhran nodded, shrugging his way loose of his captor’s hands. “Yes...yes, Captain,” he said, nodding. He looked around the room, his eyes meeting Eirik’s briefly, uncertainly, and then he turned to Aedhir again. “Is Wen alright, sir? Have you seen her? Is she...?”

“She is fine, Odhran,” Aedhir assured him. “Eirik let me see her only a little while ago. She is nearby for the moment, and he has promised me she will be safe.”

Odhran nodded again, his expression still disconcerted and worried. From behind him, Eirik’s children, Einar and Arnora appeared in the doorway. The siblings paused on

the threshold, their eyes wide as they blinked between Odhran and Tacita, and Odhran stared at them in return—or more specifically, at Arnora.

“Arnora, Einar, supper is ready,” Eirik said to them. “Wash your faces and hands and come help your Mothir Halla serve our guests.”

Arnora met Odhran’s gaze breathlessly, her blue eyes large and round. After a long moment, she nodded her head, letting Einar take her hand and draw her into the house. “Ja...ja, Fathir,” she said quietly, averting her eyes to the long hem of her dress.

“Ja, Fathir,” Einar said.

Eirik motioned to Thorir. “Leysar hana,” he said. “Cut them loose, Thorir. Free them.”

Thorir offered Eirik a fleeting scowl, but did not voice the disapproval he obviously felt. He drew his dagger from his belt and set to work cutting loose Odhran and Tacita’s bonds.

“What is going on, Eirik?” Aedhir asked. “Why have you brought us here? What do you want?”

Eirik smiled at him. “At the moment? Some supper,” he said. He gestured with his hands toward the benches, inviting Aedhir, Tacita and Odhran to sit. “Please, join us. Thorir, Kolbrun, both of you, as well—please. I would meet with the all of you in counsel afterward.”

Tacita and Odhran glanced at one another, clearly perplexed. Aedhir did not turn his gaze from Eirik’s. “Alright,” he said, nodding his chin once, and Eirik’s smile broadened.

“Kaeti,” he said. *Splendid.*

Chapter Seven

As Halla set about filling wooden bowls with steaming portions of a thick, creamy fish stew, Odhran and Tacita were each led in turn into the back of the house and allowed to wash their faces, change their clothes.

Odhran knelt on the floor in only a fresh pair of trousers, rubbing a wet linen across his face, the scruff of his beard. He had not found much sleep lately, and nearly trembled with exhaustion. He was filthy, disheveled, distinctly malodorous and grateful for the opportunity to scrub at least some of the sweat and grime from his body.

For the last four days, he had been caught in a confusing mixture of emotions—he was thrilled and wondrous as a small child at his simple, fascinating proximity to the Enghan, and at the same time, he was desperately alarmed and frightened. No one had told them what the Enghan wanted with them. It was obvious they did not mean to kill the crew from the *a'Maorga*, or they would have likely done so already—Odhran harbored no doubts about that. But their intentions remained a mystery, and though they seemed cordial enough now that they had reached their byr, he was troubled nonetheless.

The village of Lith had astounded him. He had read accounts in Abhacan histories of the Morthir describing such places, the sorts of architecture and fortifications he saw firsthand in Lith. While most other menfolk in the Morthir and Tiralainn had moved past such rudimentary, archaic styles of structure, opting for towering, multi-leveled buildings with intricate glasswork, roofing and architectural beauty, the Enghan remained poised and unaltered throughout time. Their homes and villages remained

exactly as they had for millennia. Their clothes remained the same. Their weapons, hairstyles, food—all of it just as he had learned. He was surrounded by living history; a way of life long forgotten to other races of Men. The fact that they had never felt the need for more than this, that they had survived and flourished by the observation of these ancient, familiar customs and practices left him breathless with awe and admiration.

A soft sound attracted his gaze, drawing him from his thoughts. Eirik's daughter, Arnora, had stepped around the edge of the wall, using the distraction of so much company in the home, and the conversations among her family and friends to steal unnoticed into the back room. She stared at Odhran for a long moment, as if she shared for him the fascination he felt for her people.

He looked back at her, feeling color stoke in his cheeks. Arnora was beautiful. She had auburn hair, like her father, streaked with blond in places from the sun. Her face was oval-shaped, with high, distinctive cheekbones and a narrow chin that framed and accentuated her large, full mouth. She had enormous blue eyes, a piercing attentiveness and curiosity to her gaze that he found striking and nearly mesmerizing.

"Hullo," he said after a long moment pinned by those eyes, that unwavering stare. His voice came out a feeble croak, and he cleared his throat, blinking down at the basin of water.

"They say you are a bjorn," Arnora said. "A bear. They say you are a bear Lopt has disguised as a man."

He blinked at her, puzzled. "Who said that?"

“The others in the byr,” Arnora said. “They said you fought twenty of Thorir’s strongest Rekk and saw them fall by your fists. They say you are Bjorn’sterkr, a bear enchanted by Lopt, given the cloak of a man’s form that you might walk among us.”

“I...I am not a bear,” Odhran said. *Twenty of the Rekk?* he thought, perplexed but pleased. He had fought with perhaps four or five of them at the most on the beach; he had been seized with such rage when Thorir had clapped his hand between Wen’s thighs, he had lost his reason. *Twenty Rekk*, he thought again, his pleasure growing. *Hoah, well, now.* “I am a man,” he told Arnora. “That is all.”

He wiped his hand against his pant leg to dry his fingers, and then offered his palm in greeting to her. “My name is Odhran Frankley.”

“What does that mean?” she asked, studying his outstretched hand without moving to accept the shake.

“Frankley?” Odhran lowered his hand slowly, awkwardly from the air. “It...it means a *free man*, I believe. ‘One who holds title to land, but is not of noble birth,’ I think I have read.” He added swiftly: “Although I am of noble birth. My family is listed in the Noble Registry, has been for many generations. In Belgaeran, I should say—in Tiralainn, to the west. I suppose at some point we must have acquired enough land to satisfy noble requirements, or at least to some extent...enough so that we...” He fell silent, more color stoking in his cheeks as he realized he was babbling. He tucked his tongue between his back teeth to stifle his voice. *Shut up, for the love of the Good Mother, before she thinks you are bloody daft!*

Arnora looked at him wordlessly, her brow lifted in curiosity.

“Arnora was one of the seven daughters of Gullskæggr, was she not?” he asked her, and she blinked at him, startled. “I...I have read that,” he said. “One of the first princesses of men. Her name meant *golden one*. Her beauty was so great, the god, Grimnir himself fell in love with her, stole her from her father’s home and brought her to Vanaheim. He had the walls of the great eternal hall plated with gold to please her.”

The corner of her mouth fluttered in what might have been a smile. “Yes,” she said, nodding.

“She was as strong as she was beautiful,” Odhran said, remembering the stories now, the old Enghan mythology as recorded by the Abhacan. “In the midbith—our world—she refused to marry any man lest he could beat her wrestling. Many tried, but none could. She made a deal with Grimnir that she would stay with him in Vanaheim if he could best her. If he lost, she got to return to her home.”

“But Lopt tricked her,” Arnora said quietly.

Odhran nodded. “Grimnir asked him to, because he wanted Arnora to stay. Lopt dropped honey on the floor of Vanaheim. When Arnora went to wrestle Grimnir, she stepped in the honey, and her heel got stuck. Grimnir was able to overpower her.”

“Yes,” Arnora said again. She held his gaze for another long moment and then turned to leave. She glanced at him over her shoulder, her hand draped against the wall, and then she ducked back into the main chamber, leaving him without another word.

He blinked after her, feeling somewhat lightheaded in the wake of her gaze, those sharp, inquisitive eyes. “Hoah...” he whispered, brushing his fingertips against his

bearded chin. He had never had a woman look at him that way before, with such unflinching—but not unkind—scrutiny.

They say you are a bjorn, Arnora had told him. A bear. They say you are a bear Lopt has disguised as a man. They said you fought twenty of Thorir's strongest Rekk and saw them fall by your fists.

“Twenty men,” he murmured, and he shook his head slightly, as if rousing from a trance. He chuckled, still looking toward the empty space where Arnora had stood only moments ago. “Hoah, there is something, I should think.”

After supper, Eirik sent his family away, dispatching Halla, Arnora and Bjarki to a neighbor's house. He allowed Beinir to remain; it was the old man's house, and Aedhir assumed it would be impolite to ask him to leave. Eirik also allowed his oldest son, Einar to remain behind, and Aedhir thought he understood this, as well.

The death of Eirik's father had apparently caught the man off guard. He had shouldered the responsibility for his father's people, for the three villages of his clan, as was his duty and birthright, and though he was quite capable of handling such responsibility, to Aedhir's observance, Eirik had not been particularly eager for it.

“My father was young enough yet in his years, and wise,” Eirik had told him during their trek to Lith. His voice had been quiet as he spoke, filled with sorrow. “I know that he rejoices now in the great hall of Vanaheim, but it still seems more dream than truth to me that he is gone. There was surely so much more that he still might have done.”

Aedhir suspected this was why Eirik allowed Einar to remain. He had told Pryce that the Enghan were frightened and desperate; this much, Aedhir knew was true. They had endured the relentless threat of Torachan assault for ten years, but what was upon them now was more than this.

Something is getting ready to happen, Aedhir thought. The attack against the southern Torachan encampment had only been the beginning. Whatever the Enghan had planned, Eirik thought it was dangerous enough to warrant initiating his son into battle, to invite him to join in his council.

He thinks something might happen to him in the days to come, Aedhir thought, looking at Einar. He was a handsome young man, with the lean, muscled form of an adult, and the relative innocence of youth still within his face. He had large eyes, like his sister's, dark brown like his father. He had no beard, as he was still too young to grow one in full. He seemed immensely pleased that his father had not dismissed him with the women and Bjarki. *If Eirik falls, it will be Einar's clan to lead, and Eirik wants him to be ready.*

Thorir and Kolbrun remained, and the eight of them sat along the benches. Aedhir, Tacita and Odhran sat together in silence, watching as the Enghan men packed long, slender pipes with dried snuff and lit them. Thin, aromatic smoke wafted about the room as they puffed on the pipe stems to stoke the fire cradled within the bowls.

Eirik had called Aedhir to their meeting because he was the leader of his people. Odhran and Tacita had established enough familiarity with Enghan history, customs and language that Eirik obviously regarded them as influential counsel to Aedhir; people

who might be able to sway Aedhir's understanding, his opinion to Eirik's desired point-of-view.

Whatever that may be, Aedhir thought, perplexed and troubled. They do not want to harm us. So what do they want from us?

Einar leaned toward his father's shoulder, lifting his chin and speaking quietly against Eirik's ear. He cut his eyes briefly at Odhran as he spoke, and Eirik raised his brows, following his son's gaze.

"You know the tale of Arnora?" Eirik asked Odhran. "Einar tells me you recounted it to his sister."

Odhran blinked at Aedhir uncertainly, and then turned to Eirik. "Yes, I...I know of it," he said, nodding.

"You know a lot about us, our people, Bjorn'sterkr," Thorir said, folding his arms across his chest, holding the basin of his pipe lightly in his fingertips. "And your woman knows our tongue." He nodded his chin sharply at Tacita. "How do you know so much?"

"I learned it in school," Odhran said. "At the university, in Belgaeran. It is the capital city of Tiralainn. I was studying history there, the laureate program."

He fell silent, realizing he had lost them at the word *school*. Einar leaned toward him, his dark eyes round and fascinated. "Where is...school?" he asked, pronouncing the word carefully, annunciating it as though it was a place-name.

Odhran glanced at Aedhir and Tacita. "It...it is a place you go to learn," he said after an uncertain moment. "Where they teach you things. Reading, writing when you are young, and then other things when you get older, like history...how to build things...medicine and healing...stories and poetry, that sort."

Einar looked puzzled. “Why does your family not teach you?” he asked. “My father taught me to hunt and fish, to sail on the sea, to build fires and houses. He told me of our history and stories, as did Uncle Beinir. Our gothi tends to our healing, and our sjona—our seer—is the only one with need to read or inscribe the runes.”

He was being curious, not combative, and Odhran did not know what to say. He and Einar blinked at one another, mutually stupefied.

“It is a Torachan place—a Torachan thing, this *school*,” said Thorir, with a frown.

“We are not Torachans,” Aedhir said, meeting Thorir’s gaze evenly.

“You came to us in Torachan clothing,” Thorir said. “You speak to us of Torachan things. You have the dark skin of the southern empire and bring a Torachan slave among us. We know what the mark on your woman’s face means.” He turned to Eirik. “We waste time with them. They are Torachans, Eirik, nothing more.”

“Our culture has been influenced by Torach, yes,” Aedhir said. “Because men from Torach and the empire have made homes in Tiralainn. But we are not part of the empire, and we do not owe our loyalty to them. I met my lady Tacita in Capua, and I freed her from slavery. She traveled throughout much of this part of the Morthir as a vitori to the imperial temple. She has met Enghan tribes before, and that is how she speaks your language. She was born in Achaia, yes, but that does not make her your enemy.”

Thorir snorted and shook his head. Eirik looked at Aedhir, his brow raised, and Aedhir knew without Eirik saying a word that he believed Aedhir spoke the truth.

“How do you know of our history?” Einar asked Odhran.

“Because Abhacans live in part of Tiralainn, a state called Tirurnua,” Odhran told him. “They used to live here, in the Morthir, what you called Nidavellir. They knew your ancestors. Your ancestors told them about Alfheim—Tiralainn—and when they abandoned Nidavellir to menfolk, they used boats your people had taught them to make, and they sailed west to our land. They kept what they knew of your history, your legends because of this—because your people were friends to them.”

“*Ah-vah-cans*,” Einar said slowly. “From Nidavellir? You mean dvergar?” He held his hand up over the floor, his palm turned down as though indicating a diminutive height. When Odhran nodded, Einar’s mouth spread in a bright, eager smile and he turned to his father, wide-eyed. “Dvergar, Fathir!” he exclaimed. He looked at Odhran. “We have many, many stories of the dvergar. Our mountains are filled with tunnels—the ruins of their ancient cities all throughout here in Sube, and in Enthimork, even. They have left such wondrous things for us to find—great structures built into the bellies of the mountains, ancient blades with edges that are yet sharp and keen, metal armor that fire and ax cannot warp or scar, words inscribed in stone and wood—runes our sjonar cannot read or understand.”

“Einar...” Eirik began, holding up his hand.

“Can you read their runes?” Einar asked Odhran, excited. “Can you tell us what they say? How they made such—”

“Einar, enough,” Eirik said, placing his hand against his son’s shoulder.

“But, Fathir—” Einar began.

“*Enough*, Einar,” Eirik told him again, meeting his gaze. “You can speak with him later about it, if it pleases you. For now, there are other things we should discuss.”

Einar blinked at Odhran, visibly disappointed. “Ja, Fathir,” he said quietly, leaning back, hunching his shoulders slightly.

Eirik kept his gaze, his attention on Aedhir. “I sent a group of men south by knarr to the Ulusian Nuqut before we left the battleground,” he said, surprising Aedhir. “There is a tribe of Oirat, the Uru’ut, who make their winter camp along the shores of Qoyina Bay. If your friend had been taken by the Oirat, the Uru’ut would know of it, and why.”

Aedhir looked at Tacita. He had been holding her hand, keeping his fingers twined lightly through hers, and he tightened his grasp slightly, in sudden, eager hope. “Did you find them?” he asked Eirik. “Did they tell you anything? Where they have taken Rhyden?”

Eirik raised his brows, his expression growing sympathetic, and Aedhir realized even before he spoke. He felt his stomach twist in dismay. “Someone reached them before we could,” Eirik said. “None of them remained. Their camp had been destroyed, their bodies heaped together and set afire. There was nothing but charred bone and blackened flesh by the time we arrived.”

“Aedhir...” Tacita whispered, anguished for him.

“It cannot be,” Aedhir gasped, stricken. “Who would do such a thing?”

“We found the remnants of arrows among the ruins and debris,” Eirik said. “The arrowheads were fashioned out of metal, formed like those the Torachan legions use. It might have been the Khahl—they are sworn enemies of the Oirat, and loyal to the empire—but it seems unlikely to me they would be so far west of their Taiga territory, their city of Kharhorin. With the imperial troops that followed us so close by in Sube, it seems to me that the Torachans dispatched of them, murdered them.”

Aedhir blinked down at his lap, stunned. He shook his head after a long, silent moment, and his brows furrowed, his free hand closing into a fist. “No,” he said, looking up at Eirik. “The Uru’ut may have been killed, but Rhyden was not among them. You told me your men had seen an Oirat longboat enter Tolui Bay. They did not go to the Nuqut, or to Qoyina.”

Eirik’s gentle expression did not waver. “We cannot know that the vessel we saw was Oirat,” he said. “Not with certainty. The Forks of Sube are broad, and even our scopes do not let us see with clarity across its waters. My men told me only what they think they saw—it might have been drift wood caught in the tidal currents, large enough to resemble a knarr from their distance.”

“They saw us plainly enough,” Aedhir said.

“You came ashore in Sube,” Eirik told him. “Near enough to the land for them to see. If the Oirat came ahead of you by many hours, as you have described to me, my men might not have been in place to keep a look out. They might have sailed past them, heading down Qoyina Bay, and we would not have realized.”

“He was not there,” Aedhir said, his fingers tightening against his palm.

“Captain, you have told me all along you thought these Oirat meant to meet others of their people in the Nuqut,” Eirik said. “The Uru’ut are the only ones they might have met along Qoyina Bay. The Morcir peninsula dividing Ulus and Lydia is part of the Nuqut—and the Khar mountains are here.”

“Rhyden is not dead,” Aedhir said. “He was not there. He is not dead.”

“My men searched the bodies. Some still smoldered, but there were none left to identify, no faces untouched enough to discern even man from woman...much less your

friend from among the Oirat.” Eirik stood and walked toward Aedhir. He genuflected in front of the bench, holding Aedhir’s gaze, his eyes soft and kind. “I am sorry,” he said.

“It cannot be true,” Aedhir whispered. *Had I felt despair just to think Rhyden was alone among them, out in the Khar mountains somewhere?* he thought, anguished. *Hoah, Sweet Mother Above, it cannot be true. It cannot. Rhyden cannot be dead.*

Eirik reached out, laying his hand against Aedhir’s. “I am not telling you this to be cruel,” he said.

“Then why are you?” Tacita asked him, her voice sharp. “You have broken his heart—there is cruelty enough, I think.”

“The empire did this,” Eirik told them, looking between the three of them gravely. “Captain, you told me you had approached an official in their city of Capua for aid in finding your friend, but they refused. Capua is a short enough distance for word to have reached their encampment in southern Sube. What if they had notified their soldiers? What if the legions thought the same as I did—that if Oirat had taken this friend of yours, the Uru’ut would know of it?”

Aedhir looked at him in sudden, pained realization. The propraetor of Capua, Quintas Vitus had doubted his account of Rhyden’s abduction, but he had told Aedhir he would notify Cneas of the incident. Aedhir had promised him in a fit of anger that he would see to his own king’s notification, and he wondered now if those furious words had intimidated Vitus enough to take some action. Vitus might have feared reprimand from Cneas if Kierken contacted them, infuriated by their delay in offering help. Vitus could have sent word to the imperial forces in Sube, simply so that he could argue in his own defense that he had done something to help find the missing ambassador. The

legions' commanding officer might have dispatched some men to the Nuqut territory to investigate Aedhir's allegations, as it was so close at hand. It would have taken time for such events to unfold, for word to arrive at the Torachan camp from Capua and for soldiers to be dispatched to sail down Qoyina Bay. The same amount of time, perhaps, it had taken the Oirat to sail north to the Forks of Sube—and Aedhir behind them.

“He might have been killed by accident,” Eirik told Aedhir gently. “Or the Oirat might have been panicked by the soldiers and killed him themselves.”

“They would not have killed him,” Aedhir said, his brows drawn. “They believed they needed him for something. They went to great lengths not to hurt him. They would not have killed him.”

“Then that leaves only the empire,” Eirik said, and Aedhir realized to his dismay that he was right. “If he was killed by mistake by one of their arrows or blades, they likely sent word to your Capuan official that the Oirat dispatched him. They burned the bodies so no one would ever know otherwise. Matter resolved.”

“Captain Fainne...” Odhran said quietly, and Aedhir knew Eirik's words made as much sense to his mind as Aedhir's. He felt the young man touch his shoulder, and he looked at him, pained.

“Do you believe it?” he asked Odhran, though he knew the answer. “Do you...Odhran, do you think it is true?”

“I do, sir,” Odhran whispered. “It sounds logical, sir. I am sorry.”

Aedhir smiled at him. “It...hoah, it is not your fault, lad,” he said. “It sounds logical to me, too.”

He stood, drawing away from them, walking toward the threshold. He closed his eyes against the sting of tears. *I failed you*, he thought to Rhyden. *Oh, Mother Above, This is all my fault. All my fault—you are dead because of my failings, Rhyden—my failure.*

He uttered a sharp, furious cry, drew his arm back and let it fly, slamming the heel of his hand with all of his might into the wooden doorframe. He felt the beam crunch beneath the force of the blow and dull, tingling pain shimmied up his wrist toward his shoulder.

Forgive me, he thought desperately, as his tears spilled. He shoved his palms against his eyes and shook his head. *Oh, Rhyden, please forgive me. I...I am so sorry. I will never forgive myself for this. Never.*

“Aedhir...” Tacita said, coming to him. He felt her arms encircle his waist, and she pressed her cheek between his shoulders.

“He was my friend,” Aedhir whispered, shuddering. “He was my friend, Tacita.”

“I know,” she said, holding him.

“I will never forgive myself,” he breathed, dragging in a ragged gasp of air. “I...I will never forgive myself for this.”

“It is not your fault,” she whispered.

But it is, he thought, despondent. *Oh, Tacita, it has been my fault all along.*

*

Eirik let Aedhir pace restlessly around the chamber, struggling to compose himself. While they waited, the Enghan men smoked their pipes and spoke quietly together. When a group of four Rekkar warriors entered the house, their arms laden with

large wooden crates, Aedhir turned and blinked at them, startled. He recognized the boxes, as did Odhran, to judge by the look of surprise that crossed the young man's face. They were the crates of firearms—an'dagan pistols and isnechan rifles—that had been stowed on their longboat. Although they had not distributed all of the weapons, Aedhir had brought enough so that every crewman—all sixteen aboard—could have been issued one if need be.

Aedhir looked at Eirik, his brows drawn. "Where did you get those?" he asked sharply, striding toward the boxes. "Those belong to me and my crew."

"I know," Eirik replied. "Thorir's men found them. Your crew ran their knarr onto some shoals off of the Nuqut coast. They abandoned the boat for the shore, disappeared into the woods. Thorir's men did not follow them. We do not know what became of them."

"You said they would burn the boat if they found it," Aedhir said.

"After they searched it, they did," Eirik said. "They found two of your men aboard dead." His face softened with remorse. "I am sorry. They did not know, Captain Fainne. They thought you were Torachans."

Aedhir lowered his face toward the floor, pained anew. Two of his crew dead, and the others more than likely so alone in the harsh winter of the Nuqut woods.

"These weapons of yours," Eirik said, drawing his gaze. "In the crates, and those you carried with you...they were made by the dvergar, were they not? These Abhacan you spoke of?"

Aedhir blinked, surprised again. He glanced at Odhran, who was equally startled. "How did you know this?" Aedhir asked Eirik.

Eirik walked over to one of the crates and pried back the lid. There were small boxes inside, each filled with the prepared load cartridges the crew had readied as they had approached Sube. He took one of the paper-wrapped loads in hand and walked toward the hearth, turning it absently between his fingertips.

“Do the Torachans possess these weapons?” he asked Aedhir. “Have you shared with them?”

“No,” Aedhir replied. The explosive power of the firearms—the black powder contained in the cartridges—was relatively new to the men and Elves of Tiralainn, although it was Aedhir’s understanding that the Abhacan had been making and using it for thousands of years. They had lived in secret for millennia in Tiralainn, and had hoarded the recipe for black powder with them. It was not until the establishment of the independent Abhacan state of Tirurnua following the First Shadow War that the Abhacan had begun to share such things with their neighboring races.

“But they want you to?” Eirik asked. “The empire knows you have these weapons—and they want you to share them.”

“It is not the weapons the empire wants exactly,” Odhran offered. “It is what makes them work—black powder. The Abhacan know how to make this, and they share it with us, the weapons, too. The Abhacan King, Neisrod, does not approve of sharing the formula for black powder with the empire, and our king respects his wishes on the matter. It belonged to the Abhacan first. They have only graciously shared with us.”

“They make larger ones than these?” Eirik asked, glancing toward the crates.

“Larger guns?” Aedhir asked.

Eirik nodded. He met Aedhir’s gaze. “Very large.”

“You mean cannons?” Aedhir wondered how in the bloody wide Bith the Enghan would know what a cannon was. Tiralainnian fortresses, cities and even ships in the Crown Navy were fortified with cannons designed and built by the Abhacans, like the an’dagan and isneachan, but it seemed unlikely the Enghan would have ever seen such a device. “We have cannons, yes.” *How do you know what that is, Eirik?*

“Have you ever wondered, Captain Fainne, why Torach has not tried to conquer Tiralainn?” Eirik asked him. “Your land is only across a brief measure of sea from the center of the empire—where their forces, their fleet is strongest. They have not attacked you—and yet, they are fixed upon claiming Engjold—far to their north, and away from the strongest measure of their might.” He pinched the rolled paper between his hands, slowly, deliberately tearing open the load, working the little ball loose of the packing and wrapping, dropping it against his palm. “Have you wondered why, Captain?” he asked again. “The reasons are the same, you know.”

What in the bloody duchan is he talking about? Aedhir thought. His eyes flew wide as he saw Eirik toss the remainder of the load—the black powder, packing and paper—into the coals.

“Eirik, no—!” he cried, springing forward. There was a loud pop, and a bright burst of sparks and flames as the black powder ignited. A thick cloud of smoke belched out of the coals and rolled toward the opening in the ceiling above.

“We both have *gersimi*,” Eirik said to Aedhir as the smoke waned. He turned his head, cupping the back of his hand lightly against his mouth as he coughed. “Black powder, you called it,” he said, his voice hoarse. He glanced at Odhran. “You are right, Bjorn’sterkr. It did belong to the dvergjar first. They have shared it, it seems, with both of

our peoples. The empire has tried to take it by force from us, but they do not dare—your weapons would destroy them. So they have tried in other ways.”

“What do you mean?” Aedhir asked, frowning.

“They take your ships, do they not?” Eirik said. “Attack you on the sea? Steal them—and your cannons?”

“The empire does not. Pirates do.” Aedhir’s frown deepened as he spoke. It had been one bloody damn such encounter that had damaged the *a’Maorga*’s main top mast. A pirate’s poorly aimed cannon, along with Aedhir’s impulsive fist flying into Vaughn Ultan’s face were the primary reasons they were in the circumstances they now faced to begin with.

“They attack our ships deliberately?” he asked, feeling anger stoke inside of him. He had known several fellow officers in the Crown Navy—men he had sailed with and called his friends for many long years—who had been killed during pirate raids in Torachan waters. “The empire pays them to attack our ships?”

“They cannot attack you on their own, in ships under their own banners,” Eirik said. He walked toward Aedhir. “So yes, they have invented the pretense of pirates to do it for them. They can take your gersimi, your black powder, but they cannot duplicate it. They have tried; their imperial alchemists in Cneas have studied it, trying to learn what it is made of, but they cannot. When they run out of that they have taken from your ships, the cannons they have stolen from your people are no more than iron deadweights to them.

“They will not challenge your people in battle, but they think mine simple and savage,” he said, standing before Aedhir, meeting his gaze. “They spread rumors and

lies about us throughout the empire so that those villages and tribes we once traded with fear us now. They tried to get us to join their empire ten years ago—they thought we were ignorant, gullible; they wooed and plied us well. Our Konung refused them, and so they attack us. They attack my people because we know how to make gersimi, and if we will not share it with them, they mean to take it by force from us.

“The dvergar taught us about gersimi thousands of years ago, before they disappeared from Nidavellir. The empire is fixed upon claiming Engjold—stealing the secrets of gersimi from us. The soldiers in the south—and those coming from the east—are only the beginning. They send more from the southern imperial states through Ullus with every passing day. They do not dare follow us too deeply into our mountains during winter months, but they will keep to the plains of Eng, their numbers increasing. By spring, our lands will be overflowing with legions. They will surge through our mountains and they will destroy us. We cannot hope to keep them from it—there are too many of them, and my people are weary, weakened by so many years of desperate flight and fighting.

“If they conquer us—if Torach learns how to make gersimi for themselves—if they can claim enough of it to build weapons such as cannons, and these weapons you have brought with you, then no land will be a match for them, Captain Fainne,” Eirik said. “They will turn next upon your Tiralainn and they will conquer you. They will conquer the known world.”

“What do you want from me?” Aedhir asked him, closing his hands into fists. “My people have not given black powder to the empire—and we will not, as long as Kierken holds the throne. Why have you told me these things? What do you expect me to do?”

“Help us,” Eirik said. “Send word to your king. Tell him what has happened, what you have learned. Ask him to help us.”

Aedhir realized Eirik’s despair, his hopelessness. “Eirik,” he said softly. “This is your battle, your war with the empire. I am sorry. Kierken has worked many long years to establish trade with Torach. My friend Rhyden worked as Kierken’s ambassador to establish this. Kierken will not throw that away arbitrarily. He would not choose sides.”

“Whatever pretenses they offered your friend and your king for trading with your people were lies,” Eirik said. “They have only ever wanted this...” He motioned with his fingertips toward the last fading smoke of the black powder. “Gersimi. And when they have it, they will take your realm by force. Your people will be the ones who run, as mine do—who cannot sleep a night through without fear of legions coming upon us in the darkness. They will hunt you down and they will defeat you. They will enslave your people—just as they have the rest of their empire.”

Aedhir met Eirik’s gaze. “I cannot help you,” he said. “Even if I agreed to try, I could not convince Kierken. I have nothing but your word that these are Torach’s intentions, that they are an enemy to our people.”

“I have had nothing but your word as to your intentions, Captain—and I have trusted you at this,” Eirik told him, visibly wounded.

“Against the counsel of your fellows,” Thorir muttered, his brows drawn as he glowered at Aedhir.

“And I have trusted you at yours, Eirik,” Aedhir said, ignoring Thorir. “But my king will not make decisions that could affect all of my people based on your word alone, Eirik—or mine, for that matter. He would want proof—proof I cannot give to him.”

“The empire murdered your friend!” Eirik cried, closing his hands into frustrated fists. “They cut him down and then burned him. They will blame an innocent tribe for his death! What more proof than this do you need for their treachery?”

His words sliced into Aedhir’s heart like a sharpened edge of steel. He could not hope to explain to Eirik that though he was devastated by the realization of Rhyden’s murder, and enraged enough to seek vengeance for it, there was nothing he could do. Aedhir knew when Kierken learned of it, he would be anguished and infuriated as well; more than an ambassador to the Crown, Rhyden had been one of the King’s most trusted counsels—and his friend. But no matter their pain or anger, there were simply protocols in place among civilized realms. Such incidences would be investigated, mediated between Torachan and Tiralainnian liaisons; meetings would be held, official apologies would be offered and accepted in the effort to preserve good will. Kierken understood this, as did Aedhir. The king would not commit his people to war simply to assuage his own grief—not even for Rhyden.

“Here is the benefit you hoped to gain from keeping these men among us?” Thorir asked Eirik, rising to his feet. He was clearly exasperated by the entire line of conversation. His brows were drawn, his hands closed into fists. “This is the intercession you hoped they would provide? You would grovel like a whipped and cowed dog before them, begging for their aid? Your eyes are wide open, Eirik, but you do not see.” He shoved his forefinger at Aedhir. “He is Torachan! Every one among them—servants of the empire! They were part of the encampment we defeated who somehow escaped the carnage or fled from it, maybe, like cowards among the trees. How do we know they were not part of the detachment sent to massacre the Uru’ut?”

Thorir glared at Aedhir. “They are imperial spies. By all I have, Eirik, they are. They have been sent to trick us as surely as if Lopt himself sent them. They are using woeful stories and lies to deceive us—to deceive you into trusting them. The empire’s alchemists have taken the precious little gersimi they have stolen and made these weapons—tools they would use once they learn to make it for themselves. If the empire cannot take it by force from us, they will lure it from us in the guise of friendship.”

“That is enough, Thorir,” Eirik said.

“Yes, it is,” Thorir snapped back. “More than plenty. I have had enough of this. Are you so soft—so without the benefit of your senses, Eirik—that you would believe this man’s word over mine?”

“I said enough, Thorir!” Eirik shouted, turning to him, his hands folding into fists.

“Your father would rise from his pyre to see such as this,” Thorir shouted back. “With every breath that this man draws, with every lie that flutters from his forked tongue—” He pointed to Aedhir again. “—you lead your people closer to certain defeat and death, Eirik!”

“Do not speak to my father so,” Einar said, rising to his feet. He stood nearly toe-to-toe with Thorir, his brows drawn, his dark eyes flashing. His hand curled against the hilt of his dagger. “You have no right, Thorir—you and your people live only because of him. You would not have lasted this far into the winter without our homes to share, our food stores.”

Thorir looked at the younger man, and the corner of his mouth raised in tandem with his brow. He glanced at Eirik. “Your son is brave, and fierce of heart,” he said. “Perhaps he should be the one to lead your clan.”

“I should only hope that if that mantle comes to me, I might be half the man my father is to bear it,” Einar retorted sharply.

“Einar, sit down,” Eirik said. He had regained his composure somewhat, and his hands unfurled, his fists loosening. Einar looked at him in angry implore, and Eirik’s face softened as he shook his head. “Please,” he said, holding up his hand. “Sit down.”

Einar spared one more menacing look at Thorir and then stepped away, obeying his father.

“Thorir, your arguments are not lost upon me,” Eirik said, drawing his gaze. “But you are wrong. I would not lead my people blindly to death. If anything, death follows us—it pursues us without mercy, no matter how far we run or where we go, and I am tired of it. Please...” He placed his hand against Thorir’s shoulders. “We have known each other all of our lives. You are as dear to me as a brother—you know this, Thorir.”

“Then I am asking you as a brother to believe in me,” Thorir said. “To trust me.”

Eirik looked at him, his face filled with sorrow. “I must trust what is within my heart first,” he said, making Thorir frown. “And my heart tells me these men are not enemies to us.”

“You would bring him to Elbeuf, seek his counsel again, beg him some more upon your knees?” Thorir asked. He shrugged his shoulder, dislodging Eirik’s hand. He snorted dismissively. “Fine—do it, then. We shall see what the Konung says of it. He will agree with me, I promise you this.”

He turned on his boot heel and stomped away. He threw the door open wide and took his leave, slamming it with enough force behind him to send loose chaff fluttering down from the ceiling.

A heavy silence fell upon the room in Thorir's wake. At last, Eirik sighed and forked his fingers through his hair. He turned to Aedhir. "You might have made this easier for me, Captain," he said wearily.

"I am sorry, Eirik," Aedhir said. "With all of my heart, I am sorry for what the empire has done to your people—what it does even now. But I cannot help you. What you are asking of me is not within my power to give. I could tell you I would write my king—I could beg him on my knees with all of the things you have told me, but it would not make a difference. Not because he would not care or would not sympathize with your people and your plight, but because he would be as helpless as I am. There are simply ways that things are done, and he cannot change that. Neither can I."

Eirik looked at him for a long moment. "I will see that you are given a small knarr and supplies in Elbeuf. Their harbor is near the mouth of Holavik, on the Chagan Sea. You and your men can sail west from there."

Aedhir blinked at him, surprised.

"I would do that, were I you," Eirik told him. "Sail for the west. Return to your home, Captain Fainne. Your friend is dead, and these lands will be no place to be before the month's end."

"You are going to war," Aedhir said. He had suspected this, but now realized it with certainty as he saw the grave determination in Eirik's eyes. "You and your people, you mean to take the empire on headlong."

"We have been at war, Captain," Eirik replied. "What we mean to do is end it, one way or the other, once and for all." He clapped his hand against Aedhir's shoulder and offered him a faint, weary smile before he walked away, heading for the back room of

the house. “Do not look so sad for us, Captain,” he said. “It is your turn next. War will find you, too, whether you want it or not. The empire will see to that.”

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Aedhir lay awake long into the night. Eirik and his family had retired to the back room. Arnora, Bjarki and Halla shared the heather-laden bed, while Eirik, Einar and Beinir curled onto pallets against the floor nearby. Odhran and Tacita had been allowed to remain. Odhran slept nearby. The lamps had been snuffed; the coals from the hearth had dimmed to a soft, waning amber glow, and Aedhir could hear the sounds of the young man’s breaths, deep and slow as his mind faded with exhaustion.

Aedhir lay on his side on a spread of wool blankets, a pair of lined furs draped over him against the chill. Tacita lay next to him, spooned against his body. He could feel her forehead resting between his shoulders, her hand against his hip beneath the blankets, and he found such comfort in her presence, her touch, he thought he might weep.

His heart would not let him sleep. He kept thinking of Eirik’s words, Eirik’s face twisted with desperate implore.

Help us.

Have you ever wondered why Torach has not tried to conquer Tiralainn? Your land is only across a brief measure of sea from the center of the empire—where their forces, their fleet is strongest. They have not attacked you—and yet, they are fixed upon claiming Engjold—far to their north, and away from the strongest measure of their might.

Help us.

They have only ever wanted this...gersimi. And when they have it, they will take your realm by force. Your people will be the ones who run, as mine do—who cannot sleep a night through without fear of legions coming upon us in the darkness. They will hunt you down and they will defeat you.

There is nothing I can do, Eirik, Aedhir thought helplessly. I am not even supposed to be here—I am supposed to yet be in bloody Cuan'darach in Tiralainn, two weeks yet from setting sail again. There is nothing I can do.

The empire murdered your friend! Eirik cried within his mind. They cut him down and then burned him. They will blame an innocent tribe for his death! What more proof than this do you need for their treachery?

Aedhir closed his eyes and saw Rhyden. His mind brought him back to that terrible night in Capua, to the bar at the Pauper's Pyre. He would see Rhyden turn to him, his tired, troubled expression softening into a gentle smile, and he would hear Rhyden's voice.

You are my friend, Aedhir.

What am I going to do, Rhyden? he thought, anguished. *I have failed you. I have failed us all. What am I going to do?*

He drew in a soft, ragged breath, closing his eyes.

"It is alright," he heard Tacita whisper as she snuggled closer to him. He had thought she was sleeping, and he turned at the soft sound of her voice. He rolled onto his back, and she shifted her weight as he hooked his arm around her.

"I am sorry," he whispered. "I did not mean to wake you."

“You did not,” she told him, laying her cheek against his heart, her hand against his stomach. She lifted her face, brushing her lips against his chin. “It is not your fault, Aedhir. None of this is your fault.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “It is.”

Tacita sat up, propping her weight on her arm as she looked down at him. Her lovely face was draped in shadows, her blond hair spilling over her shoulders, brushing lightly against his face and neck. “It is not your fault,” she said again, cupping her hand against his face. “I know what it is like to long to change the past. I know what burden it is to think that circumstances beyond our control might have been somehow if only we had chosen differently—a different path, a different word, some other course of action. I know your pain, Aedhir, and I promise you—what has happened is not your fault.”

He reached up, brushing his fingertips against her face. He had always known there was some deep, inherent sorrow within her; her tears at their encampment in Sube had not been the first hint of this. As she spoke to him, whispered to him in the dark, he realized she knew his pain because it was her own. She, too, carried the burden of some great and terrible culpability.

Tell me of it. He raised his head from the blankets, his shoulders. He took her face between his hands and kissed her. *Please, Tacita. Tell me why you are hurting.*

She smiled at him, stroked his cheek. “It is not your fault,” she said again.

“I wish I could believe that.”

“Believe it,” she breathed, kissing him deeply, drawing his voice from his throat in a low murmur. “Believe me.”

He sat up, holding her in his arms, leaning her backwards. Halla had given her a long linen shift dress to wear, and Aedhir felt the thin fabric drape around her waist as she drew her legs about him, pressing her thighs against him. He reached between them, unfettering the waistcords of his pants. He shifted his weight, and she helped him, her hands easing his breeches away from his hips. He kissed her throat again, and when he lowered himself slowly into her, Tacita arched her back to greet him, moaning softly against his ear.

“I love you,” he breathed as she moved with him.

“Believe in that, too,” she told him. “If nothing else, Aedhir, believe in that, too.”

For the moment, his sorrow and despair lifted from him as she gave him blessed reprieve and with all of his heart, all of his mind, Aedhir did. He believed.

Chapter Eight

Pryce lay on his side, layers of wool blankets tucked about him against the cold. The Enghan house he and Wen had been brought to was next door to Eirik's. It had seemed unoccupied upon their arrival; it was Blakinn's home, and he had left it untended while he rode south with the Herr. Whether the house belonged rightfully to Blakinn, or it was only one he used while his people stayed among the residents of Lith, Pryce did not know. He did not know much at all about Blakinn, because the Rekk warrior did not speak Torachan. He spoke Enghan, though, and a lot of it. He had chattered nearly nonstop at Pryce during their journey together from the battlefield. It did not seem to bother Blakinn in the slightest that Pryce had seldom—if any—idea what he was talking about.

Blakinn was an enormous, burly hulk of a man, more than a foot taller than Pryce, and outweighing even Thierley by a good thirty pounds of muscle and brawn. Despite his imposing appearance, he had been very kind to Pryce, and seemed genuinely fond of him for some reason. Pryce had come to believe that Blakinn had once had a family of his own, a son perhaps, and that whatever might have happened to them, he reminded Blakinn in some poignant way of his boy.

While Wen had retreated to the back room of the little house to wash her face and change her clothes upon their return from seeing Aedhir, Blakinn genuflected on the dirt floor beside Pryce. He had stoked a fire in the small, square, stone hearth in the center of the room, but the blaze had not had time yet to cut the chill in the air. Blakinn had drawn Pryce's blankets about his shoulder. "Er thu kaldr, litt'einn?" he had asked.

Enghan sometimes sounded similar enough to the common language that Pryce could figure out what Blakinn was saying. Here was one such instance. Blakinn had said, *Are you cold, little one?*

Pryce had smiled at him. "No, Blakinn," he had lied, shaking his head. "I am fine."

He had found one fleeting hope of escape while they had traveled to Lith. During one of the Enghan's first, infrequent stops, Blakinn had lowered Pryce's blindfold from his face and allowed him to relieve himself. This fleeting opportunity had been all that Pryce needed to study the ropes about his wrists without drawing suspicion. The fashioning of the knots were unfamiliar to him, but he had spent half of his life on the sea, and tying knots of varying degrees of intricacy and tautness was fairly second-nature. He had memorized the design of the interlocking twine, and as they rode along after that, Blakinn's voice yammering in undecipherable but friendly conversation in his ear, Pryce had thought about the knots, pondered over them.

He had been unable to crane his wrists, cant his hands enough to reach his own. That much he determined right away. He could hook his fingers over his wrist and paw at the knots, fumble against them, but he could not move with enough dexterity to even loosen them, much less unfetter them.

But if I could get close enough to one of the others, he had realized. I could untie theirs, loosen them enough that they could wriggle free.

Opportunity had presented itself two days later. The Enghan had stopped again. Pryce had expected to be brought somewhere to relieve himself again; he had been caught off-guard when instead, Blakinn led him a short distance away from his

bergelmir, halted and put his hands against Pryce's shoulders, easing him onto his knees.

They had been in a forest again. Pryce had been able to smell pine sap in the air since early afternoon, and he had feel pine needles beneath his knees, crunching softly beneath his weight.

Pryce had heard someone calling out in friendly fashion to Blakinn; one of his friends from among the ranks had found him. Blakinn had laughed and called back in greeting, and then Pryce had heard him walk away. The sound of the other Enghan's voice boomed again, and he had heard them talking together, laughing nearby.

He had heard more footsteps approaching him. An Enghan man barked something sharply, and then someone had uttered a soft, breathless grunt as they fell against the pine needles beside him. Pryce had felt a sudden excitement. It was someone from the longboat crew, someone else shoved to the ground next to him.

"Who is that?" he had whispered, turning his head, listening to the Enghan who had snapped stomp away from them. "Who is there?"

"Pryce?" he had heard a small voice whimper, and his heart had suddenly seized, wracked with dismay.

Oh, Mother Above/ Of all of the bloody people, all of the bloody times, not now...not bloody now...!

It had been Wen—likely the last person in the world Pryce had wanted anything to do with at that point. She had fallen against him, trembling, her fingers clutching at the front of his coat. The Enghan made no move to separate them, and Pryce had realized this was the best way, better even than one of the men, the only way. The

Enghan had seen only a hysterical girl turning to her friend for comfort. They had not suspected anything otherwise. *If they let us keep this close, I can untie her*, he had thought.

“Aelwen,” he had whispered, lowering his face toward hers, letting his lips brush against her ear as he spoke softly, deliberately. “Aelwen, listen to me.”

“I am sorry,” she had said to him. “Please, I...I am so sorry. I did not mean to hurt you. I...I did not mean to lie...” She had moved her hands, touching his face with her fingers. “I did not mean it. I...please, I wanted to tell you...so...so badly, Pryce...please do not be angry with me.”

“Aelwen,” he had said again in a hush. He had not wanted to think about her; he had not wanted to remember that sudden, stricken moment of horrified realization on the beach, when the Enghan, Thorir had thrust his hand between her thighs. Pryce had known it then; it had struck him with all of the force of a catapulted stone in the gut. He had not needed to hear Odhran’s furious screams to know with certainty; he had not needed Aedhir to say it aloud to realize to whom he had been entrusting his friendship, his heart to all of those weeks.

This is Aelwen...my daughter.

Aelwen. He had replayed every conversation he had held with Wen over and over again in his mind to his dismay, realizing every last intimate secret and thought he had shared. He had told her everything. He had been so grateful for a friend, someone to confide in that his sense had abandoned him, the restraint that was typical for him waning recklessly and in full.

“Please,” Wen had whispered to him in the forest, touching his face. “Please, Pryce, do not be angry.”

He had wanted to seize her by the shoulders and shake her furiously, helplessly. *I thought you were my friend!* he had wanted to shout at her. *The best I have ever known—I trusted you! I told you everything! Everything about me—and I thought you shared in return, but it was all lies! I thought you were my friend. My best friend, Wen—you were my bloody damn best friend.*

“Aelwen,” he had said, drawing any semblance of friendliness from his voice, hissing in her ear. “Shut up.”

She had gasped, falling silent, her breath stilling against his skin.

“I do not care how sorry you are,” he had breathed at her. “There are more pressing matters at the moment than any pathetic need for absolution you might feel.”

“Pryce...I...” Wen had whimpered, realizing his anger, his pain.

“I am going to untie you,” he had hissed. “I cannot reach my own knots, but I can loosen yours. Get your hands off of my face and bring them toward my lap. Move your hips toward me and try to hide me while I do it.”

She had not said anything. He had felt her breath flutter against him as her hands moved away from his face, and he jerked her wrists roughly against his thigh. He kept his cheek pressed against hers, his lips near her ear as his fingers danced across her bindings, setting to work on the knots.

“Listen to me,” he had said. “We are in a forest again. We must be north of the mountains now, toward the Holavik Bay. I am going to untie you. Go south, go back to the battlefield and wait for the Torachans. That Enghan man, Thorir, said legions of

them were crossing the isthmus from Enthimork and coming into Sube. We have been moving for two days. They must be nearly to the battlefield by now. Wait for them—meet them there. Tell them what has happened. They can help us. Can you do that, Aelwen? Can you run away and hide? Can you find your way to the south again?”

She had nodded, wordlessly, trembling against him, and he had heard her hitch in a quiet breath as she began to cry.

Oh...please...do not do that, he had thought in dismay, feeling sudden remorse at his harsh tone, his sharp words. *Oh, Mother Above, I...do not cry, Wen.*

Nothing broke him more than a woman’s tears. Nothing stripped him of anger or reason, nothing crippled his heart more swiftly or thoroughly. He hated for a woman to cry. His mother had cried so much, and he had always felt so helpless against her tears, so culpable for them. Had he told Wen this? Did she know, and was just using it against him? He could not remember. He had told her so much, there was no telling, no conceiving of what—if anything—had remained unsaid between them.

She had uttered a soft, hurting sound, a fragile, breathless mewl, and Pryce had closed his eyes, his hands falling still against her bindings. *Please do not do this to me*, he had thought.

“Wen...” he had whispered. She had turned her cheek against his and he had felt her tears against his skin, seeping out from beneath the edge of her blindfold. “Wen, come on now...please...please do not...”

“I...I am sorry.” He had felt her hands move beneath his, her fingers slip between his own. “Please, Pryce...I am so sorry...”

“Wen, there is not much time,” he had said. “Please...” *Do not do this to me, Wen.*

“I did not mean to hurt you,” she had whispered, lifting her face, her breath warm against his ear. “Please, Pryce, I did not mean for this...any of it. Not like this.”

And then she had whispered something to him that had left him stunned and reeling even now, a full day later. It had stripped the anger from him in full, leaving him helpless and confused.

“I love you,” she had breathed to him, stilling his breath, his heart.

“Wh-what...?” he had gasped, drawing away from her, startled.

Blakinn had hooked his hands beneath Pryce’s arms at this precise moment, and pulled him up and away from Wen. Pryce had felt his fingers dance one last moment against hers, and then they brushed against only the empty air between them.

He had been back in the saddle with Blakinn, the bergelmir moving beneath them again before it even occurred to Pryce that he had not unfettered Wen’s bonds. The moment was gone; his plan was ruined. Somehow, he had not cared about this. In fact, it had been the furthest thought from his mind.

I love you.

Why did you say that? he thought as he lay upon the floor of Blakinn’s house. He could hear Wen in the small room at the rear of the house; her footsteps rustled against the chaff-strewn floor. He could hear the water splash softly as she dipped her hands or a linen into the wash basin.

Why did you say that, Wen? He still felt dazed with shock. No woman had ever said those words to him before. He had never offered them either, except for clumsy

attempts in the last letter he had ever written to Mena—little more than wasted ink set to parchment. He had hoped Mena might love him, but he had always known on some level that had been too painful for him to acknowledge that she did not and never would.

I love you.

It had never occurred to Pryce as he had despaired over all of the secrets he had shared and confided with Wen that she might have been sincere in her attention, her friendship. It had all seemed blown into the wind to him when he realized she was a girl. He had been dismayed most of all to think that more than her identity, her friendship to him had been a cruel and calculated lie.

He had never considered that as he had spoke to her, as he had opened his heart and mind to her so freely and unguarded that she might have fallen in love with him. It simply did not seem possible. Pryce had always felt like Mena had judged him fairly and accurately; she had not found anything of merit in his mind or heart, and Pryce had convinced himself that her assessment would likely be shared by any woman he ever fancied.

Mother Above, he thought. *Why did you say that, Wen?*

He heard her footsteps again and realized she was coming. He closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep, listening to the whisper of her feet against the floor. He heard Blakinn speak to her, directing her toward the pallet he had made for her next to Pryce, and she mumbled something in hesitant thanks.

Pryce listened to the rustling of blankets as Wen lowered herself to the floor. Blakinn had not unfettered their hands, but Pryce knew it was a moot point now to even

bother untying Wen's bonds. Aedhir had asked them not to; he had instructed them not to do anything, and Pryce had agreed to this, albeit reluctantly.

"Gothr draumar, litt einnar," Blakinn said to them, as his footsteps faded. *Good dreams, little ones.* He walked into the back room, to his bed for the night.

Pryce and Wen lay alone, with only the dancing glow of the fire, the crackling of flames against dry wood for company. After a long, silent moment, he heard Wen wriggle and felt her fingertips brush against the back of his shoulder.

"Pryce?" she whispered.

He did not answer. He did not know what to say to her.

"Pryce, are you...are you sleeping?" she asked, her voice soft, little more than a breath.

When he still did not reply, she moved again. He felt her draw against him, her body spooned near to his. She touched his back gently with her hands, and tucked her forehead between his shoulders. "Please," she whispered.

He opened his eyes and watched the amber glow of flames fluttering against the wall.

"Please talk to me," Wen begged softly, her voice tremulous, her fingertips clutching lightly at his blankets. When she lifted her chin, he could feel the warmth of her breath against the nape of his neck, the back of his ear.

"I told you about my mother," he said quietly, his brows drawing together.

"I...I know," she whispered.

Most of Pryce's memories of his mother were shameful things he had kept fiercely hidden, locked away within his heart. He never spoke with anyone about her,

not even Aedhir. More than anything else he had told Wen, the fact that he had shared these memories with her shamed him the most. Inire Finamur had been mad, and Pryce had always felt an agonizing culpability for her madness. Even though in his mind, he knew there was nothing he could have done to prevent it, in his heart, he still thought if he had only tried harder, he might have kept her from her grief and isolation, saved her somehow.

She had gone to bed one night and opened her wrists with a folding razor. Pryce had found her the next morning, laying in her bed, blood on the sheets in a broad stain, blood upon her gown. He had been twelve years old. He had not understood; he still did not understand. He still thought it was his fault.

“I told you about my mother, Wen,” he whispered again, shrugging his shoulder away from her hands.

“I know,” she said softly, her fingertips finding his back again, tentatively.

“I thought you were my friend,” he said. He drew his bound hands toward his face. “My best friend, Wen.”

“I am sorry, Pryce,” she whimpered, her voice trembling. “I...please, I am your friend.”

He managed a soft, bitter laugh. He flapped his arm again to dislodge her hands. “You do not lie to friends, Aelwen,” he said. “You do not pretend to be someone you are not, and then make up whatever stories you bloody damn well please to make them like you.”

“I did not make up stories,” she whispered, making him laugh again, shaking his head. “I did not, Pryce. I might have told you men were women...changed that, but I did not make them up.”

“So your Dwarf lover was real?” he asked, his voice sharp and mean. “Only it was a Dwarf man, not a Dwarf woman—and you loved him, or so you thought.”

“Yes,” Wen said softly. “Yes, his name was Nichas, and he was real. I thought I loved him.”

Pryce fell silent, caught off-guard by this frank admission.

“My mother wanted me to marry a dreadful man,” Wen said. “That was not a lie, either. She really did something to send Nichas away and meant to make me marry this awful nobleman. I did not want to, but I might have...no matter how angry or hurt I was if I had not...”

She was quiet for a long moment, and she touched him again. “I found my father’s letters,” she whispered. “I did not tell you that. I could not—I knew that you would know if I told you. You would know who I am.”

“I had the right to know,” he said.

She nodded, her nose brushing against him. “Yes, you did,” she said softly, anguished.

“I would not have told you things if I had known.”

“I know,” she whispered, caressing her hand against his shoulder. “Forgive me. Please, I am begging, Pryce. Please forgive me.”

He closed his eyes and said nothing, tucking his forehead against his hands.

“I love you,” she said.

“Do not say that,” he whispered, stricken.

“But I do,” she said, and she gasped softly, weeping again, cleaving his heart.

She pressed her brow against his shoulder and trembled against him.

“Please, Wen,” he breathed. “Please, just go to sleep. Do not do this to me.”

“I love you, Pryce.”

He forked his fingers in his hair and pressed the heels of his palms against his brow. “Please, Wen,” he begged. “Please, I...I cannot...please, just leave me alone. Go to sleep.”

She whimpered quietly, her tears spilling.

“Please do not cry,” he whispered. “You will break me, Wen...”

“I am sorry,” she gasped. She was quiet after this, her tears fading into quiet, tremulous hiccups. He lay awake, listening to the soft, fluttering sound of her breath. She fell asleep next to him, her body curled against his, her forehead against his back. He could feel her knees tucked against the back of his thighs, her hands against the middle of his back. She was warm; he could feel the heat of her body seeping through her blankets, through his.

He fell asleep at last, nearly an hour later, his exhausted mind marveling over how warm she was; how it did not feel so bad to have her tucked against him. It felt nice to him, he realized dimly as he faded off to sleep; it felt almost right somehow.

*

When Pryce awoke the next morning, he could not remember where he was at first, and he stared in bewildered fright at the unfamiliar room before him. He sat up, but

when he tried to move his hands, he realized they were bound together, and he remembered.

“Hoah...” he whispered, shuddering. He was at Blakinn’s home, in the Enghan village of Lith. He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair and blinked dazedly about. New, faint sunlight spilled through the opening in the ceiling above the square hearth; the fire had long since died, and the room was very cold. His breath hung in the air before him.

Wen murmured from beside him, and he looked down at her. She did not rouse; she moved her hands as if reaching for him, her fingertips brushing lightly against his hip. The Enghan had given her a dress to change into the night before, a simple, long-sleeved frock dyed a light shade of blue. Her eyes were closed, her expression soft as she slept. As Wenham Poel, she had worn her shoulder-length hair caught back in a tail against the nape of her neck, as was fashionable for noblemen. She wore it unfettered now, and in her sleep, it had tumbled about her face in wayward curls and tendrils. For the first time, Pryce saw her—really saw her—as a young woman, and he stared at her, breathless to realize how beautiful she really was.

He wanted to believe her, he realized as he looked down at her. He had grown accustomed to her, fond of her in the guise of Wen Poel, and he had missed her. He missed her still, and he wanted to believe her because he did not want to lose her. No matter what had happened, he remained fond of her in his heart, and he missed her friendship, her company, her comfort.

He touched her, brushing his thumb lightly against her cheek, and he smiled softly as her brows drew together. He had tickled her; it had aggravated her, and she

turned her face away. “Stop...damn it...” she murmured, flapping her hands lightly against his.

It was something his friend Wen would say; not a man or a woman, but his friend, someone dear to him. *My best friend*, he thought.

“Alright, Wen,” he whispered.

He drew his hand away from and crawled out from beneath his blankets. He stumbled about for an uncertain moment. The fire had died, and he did not see any wood near the hearth to rekindle it. He remembered that Blakinn had brought wood inside with him the night before, and Pryce wondered if there was a pile out in the yard somewhere, maybe stacked alongside the house. He went to the door and opened it, wincing as it groaned on its hinges. He turned and looked over his shoulder; he could hear Blakinn snoring quietly from the back room, undisturbed by the sound. Pryce slipped across the threshold and out into the yard, blinking against the dim, pale glow of the newly risen sun.

It was very cold; the ground was crusted with a thin layer of old snow and new frost. Pryce saw a piled heap of split firewood across the yard, beneath the eaves of a small barn, and he tromped through the snow toward it. Collecting firewood had seemed a relatively simple task in the undertaking, but he realized it was a bit more trouble than he had anticipated with his hands bound together. His gloves were inside the house, and his hands were quickly numb with cold as he struggled to ease logs from the pile against the crooks of his elbows. He managed to get four or five pieces in place. When he turned to trundle them inside, he felt them shift and slip in his grip, and he danced

backwards, his eyes wide with start as they dropped to the ground. One of the logs smacked against the top of his boot and he yelped.

“Damn it,” he muttered, shaking his foot, wincing as he stepped gingerly on it. Nothing broken, but bruised for certain. “Bloody well rot it all...”

“Let me help you,” he heard a voice say behind him, and he turned in surprise to find Odhran ducking between the fence rails separating Eirik’s adjacent yard and Blakinn’s. Odhran walked toward him, his hands unbound and outstretched.

“Are you alright, Lieutenant?” Odhran asked him, reaching for Pryce’s bound wrists.

“Yes, I just...a piece fell on my foot,” Pryce said. “I will live.” He blinked at Odhran’s hands as he started to work at unfettering Pryce’s bonds. “Your hands are untied.”

“They cut them loose last night,” Odhran said, frowning, puzzled by the knots.

“Pull the short end through,” Pryce told him, nodding at his hands in directive. He raised his palms toward his face and bit the side of one looped coil with his teeth.

“Through here,” he said, lisping around the rope.

“Oh,” Odhran said, following his instruction.

“And around again,” Pryce said. “See...? It loops around again.”

“I see,” Odhran nodded. He glanced up at Pryce and smiled. “You could have done this yourself, I suspect.”

“Could not reach it myself,” Pryce said, and Odhran laughed. Pryce looked at him for a long moment. “You are with Aedhir?” he asked.

“Yes,” Odhran nodded. “They brought me and Tacita to him last night, because we both...we know more about the Enghan than the others.”

Pryce nodded.

Odhran met his gaze, his hands pausing against the ropes. “Rhyden Fabhcun is dead,” he said softly. Pryce gasped, startled. “Eirik sent men to an Oirat village along Qoyina Bay, a tribe called the Uru’ut. He said they are the only ones who make their camp there, the only ones they might have brought Lord Fabhcun to. The village had been destroyed. The empire reached them first. Eirik thinks the propraetor from Capua, the one Captain Fainne talked to might have sent word to the legion camp south of here, even though he told the Captain he would not help. He thinks they went to the Uru’ut camp to look for Lord Fabhcun, and he was killed somehow. They burned all of the bodies beyond recognition.”

“Mother Above,” Pryce whispered, stricken. He looked toward Eirik’s house. “Aedhir...is...is he...?”

“He is devastated,” Odhran said. “But there is more than this.”

“More?”

“The Enghan have black powder. They say that is why the empire wants Engjold so badly. Thousands of years ago, the Abhacan taught them how to make it.”

“Black powder,” Pryce repeated, puzzled.

Odhran nodded grimly. He set to work loosening Pryce’s bonds again. “Eirik said that is what the empire wants—black powder, and the weapons the Abhacan have designed to use with it. Cannons, an’dagan, isneachan...they want to use them to

conquer the known Bith.” He glanced at Pryce. “He says they pay pirates to attack our ships, steal our black powder and our cannons so they can try to learn how to make it.”

“What...?” Pryce gasped again, stricken.

“They will not attack Tiralainn outright—not yet anyway—because we have enough weapons to stop them. They are attacking the Enghan because they think they can get it easier that way—the formula for Abhacan black powder. If they get it, they will come for us, he says. And the rest of the Morthir, too. The Enghan are going to try and stop them.”

“Stop them?” Pryce said. “How?”

“By going to war with them,” Odhran said. “He asked Captain Fainne to write to Kierken and ask for his help, his aid.”

“Kierken will not do that,” Pryce said. “He would never declare open war on Torach, not without some sort of proof.”

“Captain Fainne tried to tell Eirik that,” Odhran said.

“And what did Eirik say?”

Odhran pulled the last of the knotted ropes loose, and they slipped free from Pryce’s arms, dropping before his feet in the snow. “He told the Captain he would have a boat prepared for us when we reach Sube,” he said. “He will let us go home.”

Pryce looked at him in surprise as he rubbed his wrists gingerly with his hands. “Do you believe him, Odhran?”

“I do not know,” Odhran said. “They are desperate, Lieutenant. And frightened. I can see that plainly. Whatever they mean to do to start this war of theirs, they are fixed upon it, and terrified of it, all at the same time.”

“We are off the quarterdeck, Odhran,” Pryce told him gently, drawing his gaze.

“You can call me Pryce, if you would like.”

He smiled, and Odhran smiled back. “Is Wen with you, Pryce?” he asked.

“Yes,” Pryce said. “She is inside, still asleep.” He looked down at the toes of his boots for a moment, kicking the length of rope absently. “You...you knew,” he said, a statement, not an inquisition.

Odhran glanced at him. “Yes.”

“Even in Tiralainn, you knew.”

Odhran nodded. “I have known Wen since we were kids. It was important to her, meeting her father. She thought he was dead...her mother told her...”

“I know,” Pryce said quietly.

“When she found his letters, she was so desperate to find him, to meet him. She begged me to help her, to come with her. I could not tell her no.” A soft, wistful sort of cast had come across Odhran’s face, and Pryce realized for the first time.

“You are in love with her,” he whispered.

Odhran looked down at the ground and shrugged his shoulders.

“You are in love with her, Odhran,” Pryce said again.

“She does not love me, not like that,” Odhran said. “She never has, and there was a time once when I could not accept that. But I guess I do now.” He glanced at Pryce and managed a crooked smile. “A lot has happened since leaving Tiralainn.”

“Odhran...” Pryce began.

“She is in love with you, Pryce,” Odhran said. “I have known it all along, though she tried very hard to pretend otherwise. I know her pretty well. I know when such

things hit her.” He met Pryce’s gaze. “She was so frightened to tell you the truth. More so than telling Captain Fainne, I think. She was afraid you would be angry with her.”

Pryce glanced over his shoulder at Blakinn’s house.

“I told her you would understand,” Odhran said softly. “I hope that you do, Pryce.”

Pryce turned to him. He did not know what to say.

“She cares about you,” Odhran said. “Like she has never cared for anyone before. I know that she does. I can see it in her eyes, her face when you are near her. I knew it from the first.”

He genuflected and began to gather the fallen firewood, tucking it against his elbow. “And you care about her, too,” he said, stacking wood against his arm. He glanced up at Pryce. “I can see it in your face right now.”

“Odhran, I...” Pryce began, abashed. “You are my friend. I...I would not...”

“If you would not, then you are a bloody fool,” Odhran told him with a smile. He stood, offering the wood to Pryce.

Pryce stared at him as he took the firewood between his arms. “Thank you, Odhran,” he whispered.

Odhran smiled at him again. “You are welcome, Pryce,” he said.

*

Pryce went back into the house and rebuilt the fire, kneeling beside the stone hearth and arranging the logs carefully. He found a small bucket in a nearby corner filled with scraps of kindling, and he added this to the woodpile, striking flints Blakinn had left against the hearth’s edge and blowing gently against the smoldering kindling until flames licked around the logs, igniting in full.

He walked over to the pallets where Wen still lay sleeping. He knelt on the floor and gazed down at her for a long time, listening to the soft rhythm of her breath.

She cares about you, Odhran had told him. Like she has never cared for anyone before. I know that she does. I can see it in her eyes, her face when you are near her. I knew it from the first.

Pryce reached down and brushed his fingertips lightly against Wen's brow, drawing her hair back from her face. *And you care about her, too. I can see it in your face right now.*

"Wen," he said softly. She stirred as his touch, his quiet voice, turning her face and murmuring. He smiled at her. "Wen."

"What...?" she breathed, her eyelids fluttering open. She blinked at him, dazed and groggy. She realized who had roused her, and the corners of her mouth lifted. "Hoah...Pryce..."

"Hullo," he told her. She blinked at him again, the sleepy disorientation waning in her mind. She was confused; he could see it. She had fallen asleep with him angry with her. She did not understand.

"What...what is it?" she asked. She sat up, scooting her hips back. She tucked her hair behind her ears, trying to smooth the disheveled curls. "What is wrong?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing is wrong."

"Are you alright?" she asked.

He nodded, lowering his face and closing his eyes. "Wen, I am sorry," he whispered.

She blinked at him, and then she brushed her thumb lightly against his cheek.

“Pryce, no,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I...I am the one who—”

“It does not matter,” he whispered, drawing her voice to silence. “I miss you, Wen. I miss talking to you. I miss listening to you. I miss the way you make things seem like sense to me. How you can make my nightmares...just dreams again, and how I can be myself with you. Not a Lieutenant in the Crown Navy, First Officer of a royal frigate, but me...Pryce Finamur. Just some plebeian job from the backwoods of Strathsbey County.”

“You are not a plebeian job, Pryce,” she said with a soft smile.

He looked at her, his eyes filled with implore. “You are my best friend, Wen. Can we...please, can we not just pretend that I knew all along? Can we both just start again, like we both have always known?”

She brushed her fingertips against his cheek, through his hair. “I would like that, Pryce,” she said, nodding, her eyes shimmering with sudden tears. “I...I would like that very much.”

Chapter Nine

It would take the Enghan another four days to travel through the Keiliselgr Fjell mountains from Lith to the city of Elbeuf. The little village had been filled beyond capacity with residents, as people from both Eirik's kyn and Thorir's had made their homes here along with Lith's native clans. While many families loaded their belongings and kin aboard the knarrs lining Lith's docks, there were not enough boats to bear them all safely. It had been decided that those who did not traverse Holavik Bay for the fortifications of Elbeuf would travel by land under the protection of the Herr warriors.

The people loaded their wagons and carts with clothing and food, abandoning anything they could survive without. While the cavalry rode astride their bergelmirs, residents rode on stocky, short-legged horses, and hitched their wagons to teams of burly oxen with long, curved horns and shaggy, woolen hides. By the time the sun had risen above the edge of the horizon in full, the village had been vacated, its knarrs upon the open waters of the Holavik, its caravan of nearly forty wagons and one hundred riders marking a slow but steady pace toward the cragged foothills of the Keiliselgr, and the steep, imposing mountain peaks beyond.

For two days, the weather held in their favor. The skies remained clear and bright, with hint of neither clouds nor snow. The passage through the mountains would likely prove difficult enough without such obstacles or hindrances. The Enghan followed the Mani River among the towering granite slopes.

On the morning of the third day, Odhran stirred as the sun emerged from beyond the crests and peaks, coaxing the mountains from the darkness of night like reluctant, dusky shadows. He rode with Pryce, Wen, Einar and Arnora in the open back of a narrow cart packed with the few meager belongings Eirik's family and Blakinn had brought with them from the village. Young Bjarki and Eirik's elderly mother and uncle, Halla and Beinir, had left Lith by knarr for Elbeuf. Eirik, Aedhir and Tacita rode slightly ahead of them in the caravan astride a pair of the Enghan bergelmirs.

Odhran sat up in the back of the wagon, drawing his blankets snugly around him against the cold. He forked his fingers through his hair and scratched at his beard. Arnora and Einar slept beside him, curled together like young pups in a litter. Even though they teased one another with a sort of relentless enthusiasm that bordered on merciless, it was obvious that brother and sister were very close and dear to one another. They had both taken quite fondly to their new-found friends, as well, and to Odhran, it seemed, in particular. They both vied for his attention eagerly.

Einar never tired of listening to Odhran tell them about Tiralainn. He was an exceptionally bright young man, and would sit for hours if allowed, wide-eyed with attentive fascination as Odhran described even the most mundane aspects of Belgaeran society to him, his own daily—and boring—routine of university classes, homework, library research, and nightly pub visits. Arnora seemed to enjoy listening to him, too. She deliberately kept in close proximity to Odhran, sometimes sitting so near to him that her knee or arm would brush against his. Those encounters would often leave Odhran feeling dizzy and breathless—not to mention embarrassed. He had never had a woman as beautiful as Arnora pay him the least bit of heed. The fact that she

seemed genuinely interested in his words, and liked being near to him left him befuddled and sometimes almost nauseous.

He looked down at her as she slept, her auburn hair swept about her face, draped across her cheek and brow. She seemed very delicate to him in form and visage, her beauty striking but fragile, like the first unfurled blossoms of springtime. Simply looking at Arnora stoked something within his heart, something warm and fond that left him dazed with wonder. *Mother Above*, he thought, and not for the first time since settling his gaze upon her in Lith. *You are extraordinary, Arnora*.

Odhran drew himself onto his knees and looked out over the driver's bench, beyond Blakinn's shoulder. He could see Aedhir and Tacita ahead of them as they rode together by bergelmir alongside of Arnora's father, Eirik.

Something sweet and tender had developed between Captain Fainne and the young Achaian woman, Tacita. Odhran had not needed to hear the soft sounds of their lovemaking the night before leaving Lith to realize this; it had been apparent on both of their faces for more than a week now. He had not told Wen about hearing them. He had felt nearly too mortified and intrusive to admit it even to himself. He had tried to force himself back to sleep that night, but he had heard Aedhir whisper softly to Tacita, telling her that he loved her, and he had heard Tacita whisper these same words to him in reply.

Blakinn glanced over his shoulder at Odhran and smiled broadly. The burly Enghan seemed to have no need whatsoever for sleep, and any lack of it never resulted in dampening his cheerful spirits. "Heil, bjorn'sterkr," he greeted. Arnora had explained

to Odhran that *bjorn'sterkr* meant *strong bear*; it was the nickname the Enghan had decided on for him, and only Arnora and Einar referred to him by his given name.

“Heil, Blakinn,” Odhran said, returning the man’s smile. Einar and Arnora had been teaching him the Enghan language, and it was similar enough to the common tongue that Odhran had picked up rather readily on simple phrases and words.

He glanced to his right. Pryce and Wen slept in the corner of the wagon here, tucked beside the crates of isneachan and an’dagan from the longboat. Something sweet and tender had been developing between them, too, since leaving Lith, and though the realization of this pained a part of Odhran’s heart, it mostly made him feel happy for them both. He had been wrong about Pryce aboard the *a’Maorga*; his own foolish, immature pride had been wounded without cause by Wen’s affection and fondness for the young lieutenant. Pryce was a good man, and he was good to Wen—good for her. On their first day leaving Lith, it had simply seemed like the strong friendship between the two had rekindled, but as the days had passed, Pryce had been tentatively, but surely softening in more tender regard toward Wen. Odhran had watched him reach for her, curling his fingers lightly through hers as they rode along, and he had not missed the radiant joy that would come upon Wen on these occasions. They had not kissed as far as Odhran had observed, but they had started holding hands a lot, and sat near to one another all of the time. As they had aboard the longboat, they would sometimes seem oblivious to anyone else around them, or any other conversations but those quietly shared between them. They would talk together for hours, laughing; Pryce would hook his arms around Wen’s neck and draw her against him in brief but fond embraces, and her smile would infuse her entire face with delight.

Last night, Odhran had watched Pryce touch Wen's face with a gentleness, a warmth that might have broken Odhran's heart once upon a time. It did not now. Pryce was falling in love with her, he realized, and for the most part, this pleased Odhran.

Wen slept with her cheek against Pryce's shoulder, her hand draped atop his blankets, across his stomach. Pryce's arm rested around her shoulders, his face turned down toward hers, his cheek against her brow. His free hand rested atop hers beneath his sternum, and when she stirred, wriggling slightly, he moved without waking, drawing her closer to him, as though it was reflexive to him, instinctive to hold her near.

"Bjorn'sterkr," Blakinn said in quiet beckon, turning over his shoulder again. "Thu alitr. Alitr at hinn." *Look at this.*

Odhran turned again, and his breath caught in his throat in a sudden, wondrous gasp. "Hoah..."

Blakinn grinned. "Thu ser?" he asked, pointing, although Odhran's gaze needed no such guidance. "Thu ser, bjorn'sterkr?" *Do you see?*

"Ek se," Odhran breathed, wide-eyed, leaning forward. *I see.*

They had reached a place where stone and snow yielded to the broad basin of a magnificent valley. Here, the Keiliselgr mountains brushed against the lowlands in plummeting drapes of granite and the river spilled over the edge of the mountain, tumbling in a frothy spray of white thunder toward the earth below. Sunlight seeped through mountain peaks, spreading in gentle, creeping fingertips across an expanse of thick pine forests and crumbled foothills, infusing across a horizon that led their eyes inexorably westward toward the sea, toward the meadowlands and open plains that were yet more than a day's long journey from where their feet had delivered them. The

sun danced across distant river currents, setting the winding channels aglow. It pooled in lakes they would not reach before dusk; it shimmered in the frigid air, in fragile mists and low-lying clouds that drifted down on wayward wind drafts toward the valley.

“Hvat er hinn?” Odhran whispered softly. *What is this?*

“It is the Ve’dal,” Einar said, rising onto his knees at Odhran’s left, propping his elbows against the back of the driver’s bench and crossing his forearms. Odhran glanced at him in surprise; he had not even heard the young man stir. Einar looked at Odhran and smiled. “It means *the blessed place*. The god Grimnir made this valley for his son Ull, the god of the hunt. It is said Ull rides the new morning’s sunbeams down from Asbith into the valley with his bow to hunt hav’elga.”

“Hav’elga?” Odhran asked.

Einar nodded. Like the other men of the Herr, he was dressed in heavy, lined leather plate armor, his sword, dagger, and a small-handled, broad-bladed ax fettered to his belt. The Herr warriors, both Rekk and Seggr alike traveled nowhere distant from their homes without being battle-ready. “Very large elk—taller than Blakinn even at the shoulder. Their antlers are very broad...” He gestured with his hands, spreading his arms out wide. “The lengths of two men combined at least. We use them sometimes to make shelters.”

“That is a big elk,” Odhran remarked. He looked down upon the valley again in amazement.

“You only find hav’elga here,” Einar said. “They cannot cross the mountains. We come here to hunt them sometimes, though they like to stay deep in the forests, where

they are hard to track and find. One buck might keep a family with meat nearly the winter through.”

The sounds of their voices roused the others. Arnora stirred, squirming beneath her blankets and moaning softly. Wen sat up, tucking her hair behind her ears, blinking owlishly at the new sunlight. “What...what is it?” she croaked, looking blearily at Odhran.

He motioned with his hand, smiling at her. “Look at this, Wen.”

She rose onto her knees and leaned over Pryce. Odhran heard the sharp, awestruck intake of her breath as her eyes widened. “Hoah...” she whispered. She reached down, poking Pryce in the shoulder. “Pryce,” she said. His eyelids fluttered open, and he looked up at her, blinking dazedly.

“Pryce, look at this,” she told him, smiling broadly, eagerly. He forked his fingers through his hair, shoving it back from his face and drew himself onto his knees.

“What is it?” he asked, turning to follow her gaze ahead of the wagon. “Hoah...” he gasped softly in wonder. He looked between Odhran and Einar, bewildered and amazed. “What is this place?” he asked. “Where are we?”

“Ve’dal, litt’harfagri,” Blakinn told Pryce. *Litt’harfagri* was Pryce’s nickname, at least for Blakinn. It meant *little fair-haired one*.

“It is the Ve’dal,” Einar said again. “The blessed valley. It means we have reached the end of the mountains.”

“I have not been here for many years,” Arnora said. She had risen to her feet, her blankets wrapped about her, and stood behind Odhran. She blinked sleepily at the vista

before her. "Fathir would take us sometimes when we were children, when we would go to Elbeuf. Do you remember, Einar?"

"Yes," Einar said quietly, his expression growing forlorn. He turned away from the view of the valley, sitting against the floor of the wagon. "That was when Mothir was still alive."

As the wagon rolled along in line with the caravan, they began to make their way along the steep slopes of the mountains toward the valley. The road had been chiseled and hewn out of solid granite, and the further they descended, the more the stone seemed to rise on either side of them, reaching skyward, obscuring their view. Most of the wagons traveled together through this narrow cleft in a straggled line, with no more than two dozen Rekk riders scattered among them. The rest of the Herr rode either at the front of the caravan, or guarded its rear.

Odhran, Einar, Arnora, Pryce and Wen all sat together in a semi-circle facing one another along the walls of their wagon. The five had enjoyed their time spent relatively alone and unencumbered by adult intervention during the journey. Arnora and Einar had taught them Enghan board and dice games like *kvatra*, *halatafl* and *taflkast* to help pass the time, and they had spent the last days laughing and talking together.

Einar drew a sack against his lap and rifled through it, pulling out a bundle of food wrapped in a square of cloth. He unwrapped it to discover pan-fried, sweetened flatbreads that he passed around to the others for breakfast.

"We are making excellent time if we have already reached the edge of the mountains," he said. "We might make it to Elbeuf before dark tomorrow at this rate. It is the largest city I have ever seen. I have never been to Vornirtindr, though I hear it is

larger still. Elbeuf is five times larger than Lith—at least, if not more. They have ten docks on their harbor, and Fathir’s uncle, Halla, lives within the great fortress keep of Fyrkat upon their hill. You could cross through its gates, walk all day through its streets and still not reach the far side by nightfall.”

He was wide-eyed and excited as he spoke. Odhran wondered what the young Enghan’s reaction to Belgaeran would be; with its populace nearing more than half a million, a man might enter the royal city’s gates and walk for a week in full without reaching the other side.

“Father even says that they...” Einar began. He had bitten into his bread, chewing as he spoke, and his voice faded all at once. He glanced at his sister, his eyebrow arched. “Did you make this?”

Arnora blinked at him. “Yes, I did,” she said.

Einar managed to swallow. He winced for show and nodded once. “Yes,” he said. “I thought as much.”

“What is wrong with it?” Arnora asked, slapping Einar’s arm and making him laugh. “It is Mothir Halla’s recipe!”

“Do not let her hear you say that,” Einar told her. “She might draw offense.”

“You are awful, Einar,” Arnora said with a frown.

He laughed again. “Your food is awful—I am truthful.”

“You will never be konung with such a mean mouth, Einar,” Arnora said, glowering, and at this, Odhran, Pryce and Wen all blinked in simultaneous surprise.

“Konung...?” Wen said quietly. “That is the king, is it not?”

“Einar, you...you are supposed to be konung someday?” Odhran asked, drawing the younger man’s gaze.

Einar smiled hesitantly at Odhran, realizing his puzzlement. “Fathir did not tell you?” he asked. He shook his head and laughed softly. “No, of course not—he is so secretive about it, like I am made of glass now, and going to break if I am jarred the wrong way. Konung Fjolnir is his uncle—his father’s brother. Fjolnir has daughters—three of them—but no sons. His sjonar—fortune-teller—cast the runes and told him he should name me his heir until his wife gives him a boy of his own. That way the throne would remain in his kinline—not even Lopt could trick it from his clan.” He shrugged. “So he did.”

“And they are trying like mad for a son,” Arnora said. “Given the alternative. They plead upon their knees to Heid, the goddess of fertility every day for her mercy.”

“You are just jealous they did not name you,” Einar said, grinning at his sister. “If you had been born a boy, it might have been you.” He rolled forward, tucking his legs beneath him and drawing himself onto his knees. He reached down and unfettered his scabbard from his belt, offering it to Odhran. “See? It is here, inscribed on my sheath and sword.”

He pointed to a series of runes engraved in the thick hide of the scabbard and repeated in etched lettering upon the broad pommel of his blade. “It says, *This sword belongs to Einar Eirikson, kin to His Mighty, Fjolnir Itreker, Konung of Engjold and heir to his lands and keeps.*”

“So you will be king someday, Einar?” Wen asked, leaning forward. She peered curiously over Pryce’s shoulder at the sword and scabbard.

Einar blinked at her, color stoking in his cheeks. Odhran had noticed that most any time Wen spoke to the young man, he would blush or look otherwise disconcerted. Sometimes Odhran would spy Einar looking at Wen when she was occupied in conversation, her attention elsewhere, and the boy's gaze would be soft and somewhat wistful. *He fancies her*, Odhran thought with a smile—and not for the first time since they had left Lith. *I will be. Einar is sweet on Wen.*

Einar looked somewhat shyly down at his lap. “Not likely,” he said, shrugging again. He glanced up at Wen, smiled and looked away again. “Konung Fjolnir has some years left in him, I think. Heid will give him a son, I am sure. It is just a formality—petty bickering between kyns. It has been this way for ages. Men from the northern clans—the Nordri from Mikillfit and H'rossjord—held the throne in Vornirtindr once a long, long time ago. Fjolnir is an A'Mithal, a midlander from Eng—like me and my father, and all of our kyns west of the Skor'vag Bay. The A'Mithal claimed the throne from the Nordri through marriage and they have always hoped to take it back from us. Their Hersirsons married Fjolnir's daughters, thinking this would be their chance. I guess Fjolnir named me his heir to spite them.”

Odhran regarded the younger man for a long moment. Aedhir had confided to him and Tacita after their meeting the night before that he had suspected Eirik was readying Einar for some sort of great responsibility. Aedhir had thought Eirik feared something would happen to him when the Enghan went to war against Torach, that his people, his kyn would be left abruptly in Einar's charge, as they had Eirik's when his own father had been murdered. Aedhir thought Eirik wanted Einar to be prepared; hence, his initiation into battle, and his presence at their conference in Lith.

Eirik is preparing him for something, alright, Odhran thought, amazed. He is preparing Einar to be king.

Einar noticed Odhran's attention and seemed embarrassed by it. "It is no great thing," he said. "Fjolnir only just announced it at the Motinn two months ago, when all of the clans agreed to face the empire together. He sent word to the kyns by falcon and sent the sword to me."

The Motinn was an annual meeting of kyn *Tithendar*, representatives of the konung who helped Hersirs and their elder councils throughout Engjold implement the konung's official decrees and policies. Eirik had explained to Aedhir and Odhran that Fjolnir had summoned all of his Tithendar to Vornirtindr earlier in the autumn for a special Motinn, a meeting in which the Enghan had made the grim decision to tackle the Torachans en masse, to take them on in open war.

Einar glanced at his sister and grinned mischievously. "I would have liked to have seen the looks on the faces of the Nordri Tithendar when Konung Fjolnir made that proclamation," he said. He chuckled, shaking his head. "I bet they bristled, their beards poking out all around their heads." He splayed his fingers demonstratively beneath his chin.

"The Nordri Hersirs were probably furious to learn of it," Arnora said quietly, her eyes round and troubled, as she apparently did not share in her brother's amusement.

"And their sons, too, having married Fjolnir's daughters for no other reason," Einar said, chuckling again. He looked at Odhran and smirked. "Rather plump, or so I have heard," he said in a low voice, dropping a little wink as he puffed his cheeks full of air, mimicking a rotund face. "A bit on the well-fed side, Fjolnir's lasses."

Odhran offered Einar his sword back, and Einar fastened it to his hip again. “But I got a splendid sword out of the whole arrangement,” he remarked. “A very keen blade, crafted by the finest smiths in all of Engjold.”

“The sjonar said you would be konung someday,” Arnora said. “They saw it in the runestones.”

He smiled at her. “They also said that you would marry someday,” he said. “The runestones are not always right.”

“You are scat,” she said, slapping him in the arm again. She glanced at Odhran and then down at her lap, blushing brightly.

“The Elves in Tiralainn use runestones to predict the future, too,” Odhran said. “Mianach Elves mostly—they live in the northern part of Tiralainn. They interacted a lot with the first Abhacan settlers thousands of years ago.” He looked thoughtful. “Maybe the Abhacan picked up the practice from your ancestors and then passed it along to the Elves.”

“The futhork runes are a great gift to our people from the god Grimmir,” Arnora said. “He bestows his blessings on things we inscribe with them. That is why Einar’s sword is engraved. We also use them to beseech the blessings of Tyr, the god of war. Here is his futhork here...” She reached for Einar’s sword, tapping her fingertip against a rune character inscribed repeatedly along the edge of the pommel. “All of our Herr bear his mark—it keeps them safe in battle. It gives their swords strength.”

“Arnora is studying to be a sjoni—a woman seer,” Einar said, his expression softening with fond pride as he looked at his sister. “Our mother was one. She was sjoni to Hersir Thrand, our grandfather before she...before she died.” His bright expression

faltered at this, but then passed as quickly as it had come. His eyes widened and he grinned broadly. “Where are your stones? Get them out—here, do some readings.”

“Einar, no,” Arnora said, color stoking in her cheeks. “I have only just learned and I...they would not want me to...”

“Sure, we would,” Odhran said quickly, eagerly. “I...that is, I should say I would not mind,” he added quickly, sheepishly when she turned to him. “I...I suppose I could not speak for Pryce or Wen...not with them both sitting right here...perfectly able to answer for themselves, but I...as for me, I would not be opposed. Just the opposite, in fact. I...why, I had my runes cast once in Belgaeran...remember, Wen? At a’Clos, they had that vendor for awhile...?”

“I would not mind for it, either, Arnora,” Pryce said. “I visited a seer once in Mengeira years ago. Some old Mianach woman—she told me I would find unexpected good fortune that day.”

“Did you?” Wen asked him.

He laughed. “I found a ten-mark someone had dropped in the street,” he said. “That was about it.”

“I would try it,” Wen said, looking toward Arnora, smiling. “Why not? I think it sounds like fun.”

“Where are your stones?” Einar asked his sister again. “Read for me first. It will be like practice, and then you can read for them.”

“Einar, no,” Arnora said, looking uncomfortable. She glanced over her shoulder at the front of the wagon. “You know Fathir does not approve.”

“He thinks it is foolish superstition,” Einar said to Odhran.

“He does not,” Arnora said, frowning. “It reminds him of Mother.”

“And he thinks it is foolish superstition,” Einar said. “He is way ahead of us, up there on his bergelmir. He will not see a thing. Get them out—come on, now.”

Arnora sifted around in a small knapsack she had brought with her, still looking reluctant. “I am really not very good,” she said, glancing anxiously at Odhran as she drew out a small pouch fashioned of hide. “You do not have to, if you do not want to.”

“I would like it, Arnora,” he said, making her smile hesitantly. “Truly.”

“Alright,” she said, cradling the little bag between her palms.

“Me first,” Einar said, slapping his palms eagerly against his thighs.

“You are incorrigible, Einar,” Arnora said, her brows pinching slightly.

“I am indeed,” he agreed, grinning broadly.

“Here, give me that tafboard,” she said. “Turn it over. I need a flat surface.”

Einar reached behind him, finding one of the square wooden boards they had been using to play games. He spun it between his hands, presenting it facedown against the floor of the wagon in front of his sister. Arnora loosened the drawstrings cinching the pouch closed and turned it over, spilling a set of small stone tiles against the board.

“Turn them all facedown,” she told Einar. “Mix them around with your hand.”

“I know,” he said, scooting closer to the board. He began to flip the little runestones over until they all sat with the uncarved sides facing upward. He then stirred them about with the flat of his hand.

“Pick five of them,” Arnora said.

He glanced at her and smiled. "I know," he said again. He pointed five of the stones out to her, and she drew them aside, arranging them facedown before her in a cross formation, with three in a lateral row and one on the top and bottom.

"Make them say something good," Einar told her.

"I cannot make them say anything," she said. "They either say it or they do not."

"I cannot read them. I will not know the difference," he said.

Arnora turned the five runestones over in turn, and then regarded them for a long, pensive moment. She pointed to the furthest stone on her left. A character from the Enghan's futhork alphabet had been carved into it: a vertical line with a V protruding from the middle. "The Thurs rune," she said. "The Gateway. It represents transition—good luck to come, or misfortune."

"Which one?" Einar asked.

"Misfortune, I think," Arnora said.

He arched his brow. "You are making that up."

"I am not." She tapped her finger against the middle stone. "This is a reversed Brenna futhork," she said. She looked up at her brother, her eyes round with sudden worry. "Your current situation is about to change for the worse."

"There is no food left in our packs but that you have made?" he suggested with a laugh.

"I mean it, Einar," she said. She pointed to the rune closest to her. "This is Nauth—the promise of hard times to come. It is reversed—upside down—and that means it will be very hard indeed."

Einar's smile faded and he looked down at the stones, his brow cocked. Odhran, Pryce and Wen all leaned forward, looking down at the stones.

"Here is your hope—the Munn stone. It means *mouth*; you will receive good counsel to help see you through the difficulties to come. Someone trustworthy is going to tell you something, and you must listen to them. If you do, you will know benefit for it." She pointed to the last rune, the one to her right. "The Tyr stone is your guiding star. It means if you heed trusted counsel, you will overcome these difficult circumstances and your honor will be strengthened for it."

"How do you know what the difficult circumstances will be?" Wen asked softly.

"You do not, I am afraid," Arnora said. "The runestones do not tell us what will happen—only that it will."

"Urd guards her secrets well," Einar remarked quietly, studying the layout of the runestones before his sister.

"Urd?" Wen asked.

"The Enghan goddess of destiny," Odhran told her. "Of life and death. She is said to be a giant spider that lives in Asbith, in the great fortress of the gods, Vanaheim. She has no eyes of her own; she has denizen spirits called *disir* that travel the midbith—our world—for her, visiting every birth. Urd sees through their eyes and for every baby born, she spins a new web in Vanaheim. The size of the web, the intricacy of its design determines what sort of life you will have—long or short, good or bad. Spiders in the midbith are Urd's *disir* spirits in disguise. It is considered bad luck to kill one."

"Maybe I am wrong, Einar," Arnora said to her brother, drawing his gaze. "Or maybe the stones are. You said so yourself that they are not always—"

“I trust what the stones tell you,” he said. “I trust what you see. Only a fool would think every fortune might be good, Arnora. And this one is not so bad. You said if I listened to good advice, it would be alright in the end.”

“You are doomed for certain, then,” she told him, and she managed a laugh that did not quite touch her eyes. She was worried for her brother; the grim prophecy of the stones had left her visibly disturbed.

“Read for Odhran now,” Einar said, turning the five stones over again as though he, too, was disconcerted by looking at them. “Odhran, mix them around with your hand.”

“Alright,” Odhran said quietly, uncertainly. He reached down, shuffling the tiles about as he had seen Einar do. The irony of the fact that only weeks ago, he had been willing to condemn Rhyden Fabhcun aboard the *a’Maorga* for purportedly practicing such seeming magic was not lost upon him. Rhyden had been weighing heavily on Odhran’s mind since leaving Lith. Like Aedhir, he had been dismayed to learn of the Uru’ut massacre—and Rhyden’s likely murder. Like Aedhir, he had his own reasons for feeling to blame for it, and the realization of his culpability had left him stricken.

“Choose five stones, Odhran,” Arnora told him, and he met her gaze. She smiled at him, trying to offer reassurance, and he smiled back, nearly dazed by her beauty. He pointed out five tiles in turn and she arranged them again in a cross formation upon the surface of the taflboard, turning them all up so they could see the runes.

“This stone represents travel,” she said, tapping her forefinger against the center stone. “It could mean this journey you are on with us, or it could mean a journey of self, a transition from one frame of mind and heart to another.”

She touched the stone to her left. It was the Thurs rune, one of the same stones Einar had chosen. “Thurs again. This stone represents your situation, your past, so the Thurs futhork means you have been finding change in your life, things that might have left you feeling restless, uncertain, maybe apprehensive or unhappy.”

Odhran thought again of Rhyden Fabhcun. His shame and sense of responsibility in the Elf’s death came mostly from the fact that he felt very much like a different now, a better man than he had been in Tiralainn, or aboard the *a’Maorga*. He could see now that he had been wrong to vilify Rhyden; he had been wrong to think Nimon Hodder had been a friend to him, and he desperately regretted that he had only goaded Hodder in his hatred for Rhyden, encouraged him in his efforts to see some harm come upon the Elf. *Changes in my life that have left me restless and unhappy?* Odhran thought. *Hoah, there is a bloody understatement, if ever I heard one.*

“You are moving toward further change,” Arnora told him, drawing his mind from his thoughts. “More than you can realize. But you will not be alone along this path.” She pointed to the top stone. “This is Gaeta, the rune of friendship and protection. It is above you, meaning old alliances and friendships will strengthen along your way, and new relationships will form and foster to help guide you. You will need them. This is the Fe stone reversed.” She tapped the bottom stone. “It means you will know great disappointment along the way. Obstacles will arise to try and delay you, discourage you. You may even lose people dear to you, either in form or only in your heart. But no matter what, you must not lose faith in those who love you—those you love.”

She met his gaze and smiled as she indicated the runestone on her right. “Bolli, the rune of secrets and surprises means that for your struggles, you will find unexpected

reward at the end of your journey. What is hidden to you now will be made clear, and you will understand why you have changed, and what is to come because of it.”

“You should not be showing them such things, Arnora,” said a sharp voice from beyond the wagon. Odhran turned, startled, and Arnora blinked at Thorir, who had reined his bergelmir close to their wagon.

“I was only reading the runestones, Thorir,” Arnora said, her brows drawing slightly. “I am not showing them anything. They read stones in Tiralainn, just like we do. Odhran told me so.”

Thorir spared Odhran a glance, his brow arched as he snorted. “Tiralainn,” he muttered, shaking his head. “You speak too long and too much with them, the both of you.” He glowered between Einar and Arnora. “And you tell them things you should keep among your own kind.”

“It is called being friendly, Thorir,” Einar replied, meeting his gaze evenly. “You might try it sometime.” He glanced at Arnora, and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly. Arnora drew her hand to her mouth, covering a sudden, soft snicker with her fingertips.

“You would do well to choose your friends more wisely in the future, Einar,” Thorir said with a frown. “As these shall not be among us long enough to matter.”

He dug his heel against the flank of his bergelmir, and the weasel sprang forward, quickening its pace, moving ahead of the wagon.

Pryce watched him go, his chin lifted as he peered over the driver’s bench, his brows drawn. “He is a piece of work,” he said quietly, frowning.

“His wife was murdered by the imperial legions,” Arnora said softly. “His father and mother, too. He has never been the same for it—his heart angry ever since.”

Einar made a soft *harrumphing* sound in his throat, and pretended to be absorbed in turning over the rune tiles on the taflboard. “He has always been a *holtaskalli*,” he muttered, calling Thorir a *wood-skull*. He looked toward his sister. “And do not tell me that you—”

An explosion ripped through the narrow ravine with enough sudden, violent power to rock the wagon on its joists. Odhran jerked his head at the first hint of the sound; he saw a sudden burst of fire that was abruptly engulfed in smoke and dust as the mountainside ahead of them exploded. The sound of the detonation reverberated in the tight confines of the chasm, and Odhran cried out, ducking his head, shoving his hands against his ears as he felt the concussion rattle his skull. Enormous hunks of shattered granite spewed in all directions, stone and earth defying gravity and soaring, hurtling through the air. In the wake of the booming explosion came a visceral groaning, a terrible and horrifying trembling in the ground as the cliff walls to their right collapsed, crashing down toward the Enghan caravan with new thunder in a tremendous, rushing tumble of dirt and stone.

“Grimnir have mercy—!” Odhran heard someone scream, and then boulders began to rain upon them, their brief taste of flight ending suddenly and brutally. The thick cloud of smoke and dirt swept over the wagon, engulfing it, turning daylight into dusk and then abruptly into utter darkness; he felt grit and gravel sting his scalp, his face, and he cowered against the floor. He hitched in a breath to cry out, and felt it fill his nose, coat his tongue and he gagged, whooping for air, strangling on the dust.

He heard a resounding crash as debris smashed into nearby wagons. He heard the shrill screams of terrified bergelmirs, the panicked yowls of the oxen, the shrieks of

the Enghan around him. The ground shuddered; the wagon lurched beneath him, battered by the repeated, violent impact of stone against the earth.

Something struck the wagon broadside. It heaved beneath them, careening sideways. Odhran felt the floor rise beneath him, tilting at a sharp, rising angle. It was turning over; he felt himself sliding toward the left side of the cart. He felt Arnora fall against his shoulder and then away from him; Pryce slammed against his back, sending him sprawling, and he heard the lieutenant utter a sharp, strangled yelp.

The side of the wagon crashed against the ground, and then flipped, the wheels canting skyward, the bed of the cart tumbling toward the road. Pryce's boot rapped Odhran squarely against the side of the head. He heard Einar screaming as the wagon listed and fell: "Leap! Leap! Arnora—jump—!"

Odhran's chin smacked hard against the dirt and loose gravel of the ground. The crates of firearms, knapsacks of food, packs of clothing and supplies came toppling down on him, striking his shoulders, his legs. He heard the lip of the wagon wall smash against the road, the old wood splintering at the impact, and then smaller rocks and fine debris pelted down against the belly of the wagon, smacking a cacophonous cadence over his head.

Odhran shifted his weight. He shrugged his shoulders and wriggled his legs, dislodging fallen supplies from him. Two of the heavy isneachan crates had slammed against his legs with enough force to draw blood. He grimaced as he drew his knees beneath him, scooting his legs out from beneath the boxes' broken, battered corners.

He rested on his knees, supporting himself on his palms, choking. His breath rattled moistly, desperately and he felt his stomach churn. He dry-heaved, his throat,

mouth and nose crammed full of dirt and dust. He opened his eyes, reeling, blinking dazedly at the unfamiliar darkness beneath the wagon.

“Mother...Mother Above...” he wheezed, spitting and coughing.

He heard a soft, fluttering moan from his right—Arnora’s voice, frail and hurting. Odhran turned toward the sound, reaching for her. He could not see anything; dim light wafted through the cracks between planks in the wagon’s sides, but it was not enough to cast even the faintest illumination.

“Arnora...?” he croaked.

He could hear people screaming. He could still hear rocks tapping and spattering against the top of the wagon. A woman was shrieking hysterically; others were weeping. Frantic footsteps pounded against the ground. Arnora whimpered again.

“Arnora...” he whispered, and his outstretched fingertips brushed against her arm. He felt her move, her hand grasping him with terrified ferocity, her fingers coiling against his arm.

“O-Odhran...?” she gasped. He heard her breath hiccup, and then she mewled softly, beginning to weep. “Odhran...?”

“I am here,” he said, crawling to her. He winced as he moved his injured legs. He raised his head too high as he sat up and cracked the cap of his pate against the floorboards above him. He gasped sharply, flinching.

“Odhran...” Arnora whimpered, and she fell against him. He felt her hair against his face, her forehead tuck between his throat and shoulder, and she shuddered against him, clutching at him.

“Are you alright?” he said, drawing his arm around her. He cradled his hand against her head and tucked his cheek against the crown of her hair. “Arnora, are you hurt?”

She shook her head against him, cowering, trembling. “Where is Einar?” she whispered, and she mewled again softly, her tears spilling. “Where...where is my brother...?”

“He jumped clear when we overturned, I think,” Odhran said to her softly, stroking her hair. “I...I think Pryce and Wen made it, too.”

“What happened?” she breathed, her fingers twining against his coat. “What...what was that? What happened? Was...was it Donar come...come to punish us?”

Donar was the Enghan god of thunder. Judging by the way his ears were still ringing with the reverberated roar of the blast, Odhran was almost willing to concede that yes, Donar himself had dropped down from the Asbith to attack them.

“It was an explosion,” he told her. “Not thunder. I think it was a black powder detonation...gersimi.”

She raised her face in bewilderment. “Gersimi?”

He nodded. He closed his eyes; it hurt to keep them open. Smoke and grit hung in a thick, stagnant cloud beneath the wagon, stinging his eyes, making them smart uncontrollably.

“But...but how...?” she asked. “Who would...who could have possibly...?”

A swell of bright, shrill shrieks rang out from the crumbled roadway beyond the wagon. Arnora jerked against Odhran, pressing herself against him, her breath tangling

in a frightened knot in her throat. The screaming was joined in grim harmony by a roaring din of voices—men’s voices raised together in fierce and brutal battle cries. The ground beneath Odhran’s knees shivered and he heard people running, their shoes and boots pounding out frantic rhythm. He heard another rumble as well—bergelmir paws pounding against the earth, lots of them from the sounds of it.

“Mother Above!” he hissed.

He heard the resounding clatter of steel against steel, and the screams and battle cries grew all the louder. Things slammed into the wagon again, jostling it, shaking it on its uncertain foundation—not boulders or loose dirt this time, but people fighting, a sudden, furious battle underway.

“Oh...Odhran...!” Arnora whimpered. “What is happening?”

He leaned toward the far wall of the wagon. She would not let him move far without her; Arnora clung to him as if her hands had been stitched to his shirt. Odhran kept one arm around her to reassure her in her despair, her terror, and hooked his fingertips against one of the planks of the wall, finding a slim margin of space where faint, dusty light filtered through. He pulled against it, and it groaned, shifting loose of its nails. He peeked out through the opening he had pried, but he could not see much. The world outside swam in a cloud of smoke and dirt. He saw silhouetted figures dancing about; large, shadowy forms of bergelmirs rushing past, their paws quaking the ground. He saw a man stumble momentarily into view before disappearing into the haze again; one fleeting glimpse was enough, however. Odhran recognized his red vestments, his silver plate armor and helm, and he drew back from the wall, his breath caught in his throat.

“It...it is the empire.” He looked at Arnora. He could see her now; his eyes had nearly adjusted to the gloom and grit. She blinked at him, tears streaking in the powdered dirt and grime on her cheeks, her blue eyes enormous with sudden, new terror. “Mother Above, the empire has attacked us.”

Chapter Ten

Odhran fumbled wildly about in the gloom beneath the upturned wagon, his hands pawing and grasping at the broken, tumbled crates of firearms.

“Einar is out there!” Arnora cried, clinging to him, clutching desperately at his coat.

“I know,” he said, grunting as he turned one of the heavy boxes over and pried back the lid.

“Einar is out there!” she cried again, her voice shrill and frantic. She was terrified, trembling with shock. “Fathir is out there!”

“I know, Arnora,” Odhran said again, groping around inside the crate, feeling what he had hoped to find—the smaller boxes of prepared loads the crew had readied aboard the longboat. *Mother Above, Wen is out there, too! Pryce, Aedhir, the crewmen—all of them out there somewhere.*

“We have to do something!” Arnora said, her eyes darting about wildly. She had cut her head when the wagon overturned; blood streamed down from a gash along her hairline, smeared across her cheek and brow.

“Help me,” he said. He twisted, reaching behind him, finding one of the crates of pistols. He jerked it toward him, wrenching the lid open. He was terrified; his hands shook uncontrollably. He grabbed an an’daga out of the crate and it fell from his quaking, clumsy hands against his lap. “Arnora, help me.”

She blinked at him, wide-eyed and confused. “Wh...what?”

He bit the tip off one of the loads, turning his head and spitting it against the ground. “Help me,” he said again, lifting the pistol and struggling to pour the prepared load of paper wadding, black powder and lead ball down the barrel of the pistol. He jerked the tamping rod loose from beneath the barrel and shoved it home, forcing the load into place. He set the readied pistol aside and motioned toward the crate, flapping with his hand. “Start handing me those—get them all open. Rifles and an’dagan—pass them to me.”

“What are you going to do?” She handed him a pair of pistols, and as he set about loading them, she began wresting with the other fallen crates, pulling out rifles.

“I do not know,” he said, glancing at her. Someone fell against the outside of the wagon with a loud thud that shuddered the wooden frame. Whoever it was shrieked piteously, and they both heard a loud clamor as he collapsed against the ground. Arnora whimpered again, her shoulders hunching toward her ears and she stared at Odhran in stark, quaking terror.

“I will do something,” he told her. “Help me get these loaded—watch me.”

The pistols and rifles had to be reloaded after every shot. He would not have time to do this in the middle of fighting; either Arnora would have to do it for him, or he would have to load and expend every firearm at his disposal: eleven an’dagan and sixteen isneachan.

If I can fire even one of them, he thought. *My hands are shaking so bloody bad, I do not even know if I can hold them still long enough to draw aim.* He had also never shot one of the weapons in battle before; he had only learned aboard the *a’Maorga*, and though he had proven a fair, if not exceptional marksman, this was a skill gleaned only

from drawing upon clay targets. *Could I shoot a man?* he thought, stricken. *Even now, with all of this, how could I?*

What other choice is there? he told himself sharply, giving himself a mental slap across the face. *Muster some mettle, Frankley! You are Crown Navy, not some simpering ninny. Your friends are out there! Wen is bloody out there—now get off your fat, bloody ass and do what you can to save her!*

He loaded six of the pistols and three of the rifles. He had showed Arnora how to do this, and she hurried to tend to the rest of them.

“How did the empire make the mountain fall like that?” she whispered as they worked. Loading the guns gave her something to focus on besides her panic and fear. “How did the gersimi do that?”

“They must have been waiting for us, drilled holes into the cliff edges,” Odhran said, canting his cheek and spitting out the tip of another load. “Dropped the charges down into the stone, ran fuse lines out and away, along the top of the ridge.”

Abhacans had used this technique for millennia in order to blast out the open-air plateaus they used for agriculture. Odhran frowned as he considered this. *But how in the bloody duchan did the empire know that?* he thought. *How could they? And how could they have known we were coming—that we would be following this path to Elbeuf? How could they know we were even traveling to Elbeuf?*

As if she had read his mind, Arnora fell still, her brows drawn. “How could they know?” she asked. “How could they have known we were going to Elbeuf—where to find us?”

“I do not know,” Odhran said, meeting her gaze. He turned around, drawing his legs out from beneath him. He balanced his weight on his rump with his hands behind him, and then he kicked his legs out, driving the heels of his boots mightily against the side of the wagon. He heard the planks groan and splinter; he felt them shift at the impact, but they did not yield.

“Stay here,” he told Arnora, glancing over his shoulder. He kicked the wall again, feeling the planks loosen all the more. “When I call for them, pass me the pistols and rifles. I will toss the empty ones back to you—you will have to reload them.”

“Alright,” she said, nodding.

He kicked the wall again and the wood splintered. The nails holding the board in place wrenched loose of their moorings, and the plank fell away, smacking against the unyielding cliffside beyond. The wagon had come to rest nearly flush against the stone. It would be a tight squeeze crawling out for a man of his size and bulk, he realized, but it would also offer him some protection and cover.

“No matter what happens, you stay here,” he said, turning to Arnora. “You will be safe under the wagon.” *I think. Mother Above, I hope.*

She nodded again, her blue eyes enormous and fixed upon him. “I will,” she said.

“Alright then,” Odhran said. He did not move; all at once, he felt frozen in place, his limbs unwieldy and unwilling to bear him through the broken side planks and out into the open air. He blinked at Arnora, his hands shaking, his shoulders twitching, his breath fluttering from his throat. *I do not know if I can do this*, he thought helplessly. *Mother Above, I...I do not know...!*

“I have to,” he whispered, his brows furrowing. He turned around, forcing himself to move. “I am Crown Navy,” he muttered, steeling himself with this mantra of Thierley’s. “I am Crown Navy, not some simpering ninny.”

Swallow it down, lad, Thierley might have told him had he been close at hand.

“I am swallowing it, sir,” Odhran hissed through gritted teeth. He ducked his head and shoved his way through the narrow opening, forcing himself out from the cover of the wagon.

He found himself wedged between the side of the upturned cart and the granite wall, his shoulder tucked painfully against the stone. He got his feet beneath him, trying to keep his grip on the isneach. He planted his foot against an outcropping of stone and raised himself above the side of the wagon to see beyond it. The air was still thick with a cloud of impenetrable dust and grit, and he squinted as he peered over the edge of the wagon.

An imperial rider raced by on a bergelmir and he ducked his head, cowering as it loped out of the gloom and disappeared once more. The sounds of battle were deafening and horrifying. He could hear sword and ax blade battering against steel; the thunder of rushing footfalls, shrill and terrified shrieks, piteous moans. He could smell blood above the stink of the dust, heavy and bitter, infused in the air. He could smell the stench of bergelmir musk; the animals were incensed and in feral, vicious humor.

Odhran could see large, silhouetted forms all around them, and he stared in breathless, stunned realization. They were fallen chunks of mountain, boulders sometimes twice again as broad in circumference as the wagon that had rained down

upon the Enghan caravan. He could see shadows flailing and darting around in the dust; men fighting with one another.

Mother Above!

He saw an Enghan man stumble from out of the smoke. He was bleeding profusely from a wound on his head. He was limping, his hip gored, the broken shaft of a spear lodged at the apex of his thigh and groin. He carried his ax in his hand, his footsteps shuffling and clumsy. Another shadow loomed toward him from behind, moving swiftly, and Odhran had a fleeting moment—not even enough time to cry out in warning to the Enghan—to realize it was a Torachan soldier on a bergelmir bearing down on the man.

“No—!” Odhran shouted, and he swung the rifle toward his shoulder, slamming the butt of the isneach against the socket of his arm, catching the length of the barrel against his hand. His finger folded against the trigger, and there was no time for hesitation or frightened uncertainty. His eyes reflexively drew their mark, even before the bergelmir emerged in full, form and not silhouette from the gloom, and his fingertip closed against the trigger. The rifle boomed; a spray of smoke and sparks spewed from the tip of the barrel. The butt of the isneach recoiled sharply, his shoulder bearing the brunt of the impact.

The soldier aside the bergelmir wrenched sideways, his head snapping back on his neck. He had been brandishing a spear, holding it out, meaning to thrust it through the Enghan’s back, and his fingers splayed wide, the shaft tumbling to the ground. His legs sprawled as his body tumbled backward, spilling from his saddle.

The Enghan man whirled at the resounding boom of the rifle. He caught the shaft of his ax between his fists and swung, the blade catching the charging bergelmir against the angle of its jaw with enough force to open its throat in a sudden rush of blood. The animal snapped at the man, crashing against the ground, its paws spilling from beneath it and the Enghan backpedaled, whipping the ax about in his hands and bringing it down again swiftly, driving the blade into the cap of the weasel's skull.

Odhran pivoted, dropping the rifle to the ground. He caught a glimpse of Arnora's hands reaching out from beneath the wagon to grab it, and then he turned again toward the fray, jerking one of the pistols from beneath his belt. The Enghan man was still swaying unsteadily on his feet above the felled bergelmir, and Odhran saw another shadow rushing toward him, another legionnaire.

"Alitr or!" Odhran yelled, drawing the pistol up before him. *Look out!* Again he reacted out of instinct, his mind and heart not coordinating swiftly enough to give him any frightened pause. He squeezed the trigger, feeling the pistol buck against his palm, and he saw the bergelmir twist sideways as the lead ball struck it almost squarely between the eyes. The great animal collapsed, its paws clawing at the open air, and the Enghan man turned, limping into the smoke again, disappearing as he raised his ax, hoisting it above his head to finish off the fallen rider, pinned beneath his steed.

Odhran looked wildly about for any sign of Wen, Pryce or Einar as he dropped the spent pistol and wrenched the other from his belt. He could not see anything with clarity, much less discern faces in the smoke and dust. He heard the rushing clamor of heavy paws and jerked toward the sound, seeing an imperial rider bolt out of the

shadows. He leveled the an'daga between his hands and fired, sending the soldier toppling from his saddle, a trail of blood arcing in the air from his neck.

The bergelmir rushed past the wagon and Odhran ducked, dropping the empty pistol. "Another an'daga!" he cried to Arnora. She poked her head out and looked up at him, holding a rifle between her hands. In his frantic rush, his panic, he had forgotten to tell her which of the weapons was which, and he reached down, taking the rifle from here. "One of the small ones," he said. "Give me one of the small ones."

She nodded, ducking her head for a moment to glance behind her, and then held a pistol out for him. He nodded. "Perfect, Arnora," he said, and he turned again, rising above the top of the wagon.

He caught sight of a blur of movement from his left, and he whirled in that direction, dropping the pistol against the top of the wagon belly, drawing the rifle to his shoulder. A bergelmir darted out of the haze, and just as Odhran caught the underside of the isneach against his left palm, the tip of his right index finger hooked against the trigger, he realized it was not a Torachan. It was Thorir; the Enghan Hersir was wounded, the front of his kyrtil and leather armor bloodstained. His weasel had been injured as well; its broad, loping gait was clumsy and limping, and Odhran could see blood matted thickly in its fur along its flank.

An imperial rider lunged out of the smoke to Odhran's right, and he had no time to react. The Torachan bore down on Thorir, a length of spear thrust forward and poised toward the Enghan. Thorir leaned back in his saddle, arching his spine and digging his heels into the stirrups. The bergelmir skittered beneath him, its feet spreading widely and as it dropped toward the ground, the spear point skewered the air within scant

inches above Thorir's face. He reached up, closing his fist against the shaft as the bergelmir righted itself. As the Torachan darted past him, Thorir wrenched the spear from his grip. He reined his bergelmir about in a swift, tight circle, spinning the length of ash against his palm and brandishing the point toward the imperial rider. Thorir kicked his bergelmir, spurring it forward, and it lunged, leaping toward the Torachan. The soldier had only just barely spun his steed about; the spearhead skewered through his throat as Thorir raced past him. Odhran heard the soldier utter a squawking, gargled cry and he fell backwards, impaled.

Thorir jerked on his reins and his bergelmir lumbered about again. Its right foreleg appeared to be the most grievously injured, maybe even broken, and it stumbled, uttering a low, hurting low. "Thu komr a!" Thorir shouted at the animal, kicking it, trying to spur it forward. *Come on!* "Hroerar, thik kamban heimskr oborna!" *Move, you crippled, half-wit bastard!*

A silhouette loomed out of the haze behind Thorir, moving fast—a Torachan rider charging Thorir—and Odhran shifted his weight, swinging the barrel of the rifle around. "Thorir—alitr or!" he yelled. *Look out!*

Thorir jerked his head at the sound of Odhran's voice. His eyes flew wide as he caught sight of him, and the rifle pointing in seeming direct aim for his head. He threw himself sideways, folding himself over the side of his saddle, inadvertently clearing Odhran's line of sight on the imperial soldier. His finger tightened against the trigger, and the rifle slammed backwards against his shoulder. The shadowy form of the bergelmir as it leaped toward Thorir suddenly twisted in midair as the lead ball found its mark. It spilled sideways, crumpling to the ground, sending its rider toppling.

Another Torachan raced out of the gloom before the isneach had even fallen away from Odhran's fingers. The rider rushed straight toward Thorir, his spear jammed in the air before him, aimed for Thorir's middle, and Odhran screamed, grabbing for the an'daga, drawing back the doghead against his thumb as his arm swung out, trying to find desperate aim.

"Thorir—fyrir thik! Alitr or!" *In front of you! Look out!*

Thorir had caught sight of the Torachan's charge as well, and his hand darted for his waist, his fingers curling about his dagger. He drove his heels brutally into the injured bergelmir's side and it sprang forward to meet the advancing soldier. Thorir jerked back on the reins, lifting his hips from the saddle, and the bergelmir reared, its front paws groping at the air, its lips curled back from its teeth against the strained bit. The Torachan's spear punched through the bergelmir's vulnerable breast; the weasel uttered a shrill shriek, and Thorir swung his arm, sending his dagger flying. The blade buried itself just beneath the lip of the imperial soldier's helmet, nearly to the hilt in the man's skull. He fell backwards from his saddle, just as Thorir's bergelmir collapsed to the ground. Thorir tried to leap free of the crumpling beast, but his foot caught in his stirrup. The bergelmir crashed onto its side, and Odhran heard Thorir scream in bright, new pain as his left leg and hip were crushed beneath it.

"Thorir!" Odhran cried. He turned frantically over his shoulder and saw Arnora staring up at him, wide-eyed and frightened. "He is hurt! I have to go to him!" he cried, flapping his hand at her. "Give me another pistol, quick! One of the short ones—hurry!"

She reached desperately behind her and held out an an'daga to him in both hands. He snatched it and then turned, scrambling over the top of the wagon. He

stumbled over the exposed axles and crossbeams of lumber forming the cart's frame and leaped to the ground. He rushed toward Thorir, jamming one of the pistols into his belt, keeping the other poised in his hand.

“Far af mik!” he heard Thorir cry, and when he ran around the side of the dead bergelmir, he could see Thorir lying pinned beneath it. *Get off of me!* He arched his back from the ground, his eyes closed, his brows drawn furiously as he struggled to free himself. His voice was hoarse with terrible pain; blood spewed from his mouth as he cried out. His hand moved for his belt, and he tried to draw his sword. “Ek kljufar thik af fra mik, thik oborna! Far af mik!” *I will cleave you off of me, you bastard! Get off of me!*

“Thorir!” Odhran cried.

Thorir opened his eyes, staring up at him, stricken, apparently not the least bit pleased to see him. “Torachan oborna!” he cried, and he writhed against a sudden spasm of pain. *Torachan bastard!* He jerked his sword from his hip, the movement hurting him, forcing a strangled, agonized cry from him. He thrust the blade toward Odhran, his eyes wide, his hand shaking, and Odhran froze, his boots skittering to an uncertain halt.

“Thorir, latar mik hlaupa thik,” he said quietly, holding out his hand to the man. *Let me help you.*

“Eigi...eigi vil...ytharr hjalpa!” Thorir seethed at him, his brows furrowed deeply as he struggled to hold his blade on Odhran. *I do not want your help!* “Thu...thu velar oss...thu munur skjota mik...vega mik...” *You betrayed us...you will shoot me...kill me...*

“Nei,” Odhran told him, shaking his head. “Ek munu leysa thik.” *I will free you.*

Thorir was weak and semi-lucid with pain. The point of his sword wavered and then his fingers slackened, turning loose of the blade, letting it fall to the ground. Odhran set his pistol momentarily aside, and got his arm beneath Thorir's shoulders, drawing the man against him, straining to pull him out from beneath the bergelmir.

"No..." Thorir whimpered in the common tongue, trying to pull away from him, his efforts waning with his consciousness. He gasped sharply in pain, writhing against Odhran. "No...do not...do not touch me..."

Odhran managed to haul him from beneath the fallen weasel's flank, but the effort hurt Thorir. He twisted against Odhran again, crying out, fainting. His left leg had been badly broken; bones had splintered in his calf and thigh, leaving the limb swollen and misshapen beneath his kyrtil and pants. Thorir moaned as Odhran got his legs beneath him, squatting, and drew Thorir over his shoulder. He clasped his hand against the small of Thorir's back, took his pistol in hand again and stumbled to his feet.

He staggered back to the wagon, and managed somehow to haul Thorir atop the overturned cart. He leaned over the narrow space between the rock wall and the wagon wall and called out to Arnora. She appeared below him, her eyes flying wide as she saw Thorir. "Help me," Odhran said, grunting as he lowered Thorir from his shoulder. Thorir was a tall man, well-muscled and heavy. Odhran was not small or feeble himself, but was winded and weary from lugging the Enghan over his shoulder. "His leg is broken, Arnora—here, get him underneath."

He tried to lower Thorir carefully over the side of the wagon, climbing down and standing against the outcropping of stone he had used as a shooting perch. Arnora

wriggled out of the wagon and stood, getting her arms around Thorir, letting him crumple against her as she knelt, cradling him against her shoulder and torso.

“Can you get him inside?” Odhran asked, trying to support Thorir’s injured leg with his hands.

“Yes,” she nodded, her brows drawn as she struggled to hold Thorir’s weight. “I...I think so...”

She managed to crawl back beneath the wagon, pulling Thorir’s head and shoulders with her. Odhran had to let go of his leg; when it jostled against the side of the cart, Thorir twisted, crying out softly, piteously in pain.

Odhran heard a pounding sound from behind him, and he whirled, looking over the top of the wagon. His eyes flew wide in sudden horror; one of the Torachan riders had seen them and was charging the wagon, his spear aimed for Odhran’s head. The soldier’s bergelmir sprang into the air, leaping out of the smoke, and Odhran screamed. He drew his arm up wildly as he pitched sideways, diving for the ground. He managed to get off a shot with the an’daga in his hand; the round punched into the soldier’s shoulder, between his armor plates more by luck than any skilled aim on Odhran’s part. The Torachan shrieked and fell out of his saddle, but the bergelmir was still coming.

Odhran twisted as he fell, wrenching the second pistol from beneath the strap of his belt. Arnora had only just barely yanked Thorir’s legs out of the way and beneath the wagon, and Odhran landed hard on his back, his shoulder striking brutally against the stone wall, the back of his head cracking against the dirt. He heard the sudden splintering of taxed wood as the bergelmir landed atop the wagon, and then it lunged over the edge toward him, its lips drawn back from its teeth, snapping at his face.

“Mother Above—!” Odhran screamed, jerking the pistol up, closing his finger against the trigger. The round exploding from the barrel was deafening in the tight confines between wagon and stone, and the bergelmir’s face was no more than two feet from Odhran’s when the lead ball slammed into its skull just above its right eye. Odhran could feel the sudden huff of its hot, moist breath against him, and then its brains and blood splattered across his face, his chest.

The bergelmir collapsed, dead, its body slumping between the cliffside and the wagon, wedged in the tight space. It drooped toward him, its snout slumping, spilling more blood against his groin as its nose brushed against him, and Odhran shrieked again, scuttling backwards, kicking at its head as he scrambled beneath the wagon.

“Mother Above...!” he whimpered, shuddering, stricken. “Mother Above...Mother Above...!”

“Are you alright?” Arnora cried, her voice shrill with panic. His eyes had not yet reacclimated to the darkness beneath the wagon, and he was blind in the shadows. He felt her hands flutter against his face, her breath against his mouth as she drew near. “Odhran...! Odhran, are you alright?”

“I...I am alright,” he whispered, shaking uncontrollably. He reached out clumsily, his palms finding her shoulders, his fingertips finding her hair. She fell against him, weeping again, and he held her fiercely, struggling against his own tears. “I am alright,” he whispered again, clinging to her. “I am alright.”

They huddled together for a long moment, and then Odhran pulled away from her, risking a peek out of the opening in the side of the cart. He had shot the bergelmir in the head, and it was not making any noises, squirming or struggling against the

wagon, but he wanted to be certain it was dead. He poked his head out of the opening and blinked in horrified realization; the walls of both the wagon and stone were blood-spattered, streaked with gore. The bergelmir hung limply in the margin of space, blood spilling from its head in a grisly puddle against the ground, its tongue lolling out in a long blade from between its agape jaws. It had nearly filled the space above them; there would be no getting around it to reach the top of the wagon again. There would be no moving the bergelmir, either; this was a large one, probably a male in excess of three hundred pounds.

“Mother Above,” Odhran whispered, ducking back beneath the wagon. He stared at Arnora, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. “We cannot get back out,” he said. “We are trapped here...for the moment, anyway.”

She was kneeling on the ground, surrounded by the scattered remnants of broken crates and tumbled supplies, pistols and rifles strewn about in their frantic, mutual haste. She had tried to lay Thorir comfortably on the ground, and cradled his head against the nest of her lap. She was stroking her hand against his face as he moaned softly, squirming with pain.

“We will be safe here,” Odhran told her, crawling forward. He reached out with tentative fingertips and touched Thorir’s leg. Even this light prodding hurt him, and he arched his back, lifted his chin and cried hoarsely, his hands slapping in feeble protest against Odhran’s.

“Ei...eigi gerar...” he pleaded. *Do not.* “Ek beid...haettar...” *I beg...stop...*

“Thegjar, Thorir,” Arnora whispered, leaning over him, caressing his face. *Hush.* Her hair draped against his cheeks as she kissed his brow gently. Her voice quavered with tears. “Thegjar. Ek kenn...ek kenn that angrar.” *I know it hurts.*

Odhran looked around in the gloom. His hands fumbled against the ground and he felt broken shards, planks from the crates of firearms. He began to gather them together. “Arnora, take off your apron,” he said.

“What?”

“I...I think I can splint his leg with these,” Odhran said. He had watched the surgeon aboard the *a'Maorga* tend to similar injuries following the storm at sea, and he thought he remembered the techniques. “We can use your apron, rip it into strips to tie some splints together and bind his leg.”

She nodded, shifting her weight and gently lowering Thorir’s head against the ground. She unfastened the brooches at her shoulders holding the twin panels of fabric in place over her shift dress, and then, at his instruction, she began to rip the apron into long, broad strips.

Odhran tied the broken planks of crate together until he had two long pieces, each about the length of Thorir’s leg. He overlapped them when he could bind them securely, wanting the splints to be as sturdy as possible. He then positioned them, one along Thorir’s inner leg, the other alongside of his hip. Thorir moaned as Odhran moved his leg gently, gingerly.

“Hvat...hvat er thik...gerar at mik...?” Thorir gasped, breathless and hurting. *What are you doing to me?* He turned his face weakly toward his shoulder, his brows

furrowing, his fingers fumbling clumsily for his belt, for weapons he no longer carried. “Ek...ek munu veg thik...” he murmured, his mind fading again. *I will kill you...*

“It is alright, Thorir,” Odhran whispered, leaning forward and hooking his hand briefly against Thorir’s. He expected the Hersir to curse him, shove his hand and proffered comfort away and was startled to feel Thorir’s fingers close against his.

“Ek beid...” Thorir whispered to him, his eyes closed, his expression softening, his brows lifting in implore. “Valla...hvar er mi kona...mi ast...? Finnar hana...ek beid...mi Valla...”

He whimpered this name, *Valla*, over and over, and Arnora kissed his forehead again. “He is calling for his wife,” she whispered, her tears spilling against his face. She looked up at Odhran, anguished for Thorir. “He...he asked you to find Valla, his wife...”

Odhran blinked at Thorir for a moment, stricken, feeling the man’s fingers tighten against his as he pleaded softly. He had known about Thorir’s wife; Arnora had told them only moments before the explosion, and Thorir had told them himself upon their capture, when he had flown into a rage, lunging at Aedhir at the Torachan camp. Odhran had known, but he had not realized fully until that moment, when Thorir’s customary anger had dissolved into a simple, vulnerable despair Odhran could understand and suddenly, poignantly empathize with.

“Ek beid thik...” Thorir whimpered. *I beg you.* “Finnar Valla...ek...ek vil mi kona...” *Find Valla...I want my wife...*

A spear or blade had pierced his shoulder, puncturing through his mail-lined leather armor. There was no evidence of the offending weapon; Thorir must have jerked it loose at some point, but he was still bleeding. Between the wound to his shoulder, and

his crushed leg, Odhran realized the young man could very well be dying, Thorir had begun to shudder, overcome with pain, lapsing into shock.

“Get his armor off of him,” he said to Arnora. He drew his hand away from Thorir’s and began to hurry, slipping the scraps of Arnora’s torn apron beneath his leg, doing his best to set the injured limb. “He is bleeding—get his armor off of him. Open his kyrtil.”

He managed to bind Thorir’s leg to the makeshift splints, further immobilizing it by then wrapping fabric to fetter his left leg against his right. Arnora removed the layers of lined armor from his shoulders and unfastened the front of his coat. At Odhran’s direction, she had taken a folded wad of linen and held it against his shoulder, pressing against it to stave his bleeding. As she worked at this, Odhran found blankets among the tumbled mess in the wagon and wrapped them about Thorir, trying to keep him warm.

“Did you see Einar?” Arnora whispered. They had both been tending to Thorir with such desperate urgency that this was the first moment she had found to ask him. Her eyes were round and filled with worry. “Did you see my father out there, Odhran?”

“No,” Odhran told her, shaking his head. He had found one of their waterskins and offered it to Thorir, cradling his hand against the back of the Hersir’s head, lifting him. “Here. Drekkar, Thorir.” *Drink.*

Thorir’s hand moved weakly toward the waterskin and he raised his chin as Odhran pressed the spout of the pouch against his lips. He drank some of the water, though most dribbled down his chin in thin rivulets. He sputtered and choked, gasping for breath as Odhran drew the water away from him.

Odhran glanced at Arnora. "I am sorry," he said, setting the water aside and lowering Thorir's head again. He reached for her, and she caught his hand, squeezing it tightly. "I did not see Einar near the wagon...anywhere. I did not see Wen, either, or Pryce. I do not know what happened to them."

"Took...them..." Thorir whispered.

Arnora and Odhran both blinked down at him in surprise. He was awake, or at least semi-lucid, looking up at them dazedly. His brows furrowed and he brushed his fingertips clumsily against his face. "Took them," he whispered again, his eyes fluttering closed. "I...I saw the Torachans...take them..."

"Take them where?" Odhran asked, alarmed anew. He leaned over Thorir, hooking his free hand against the man's. "All three of them, Thorir?"

Thorir nodded once, wincing.

"Where did they take them?" Arnora asked, frightened.

"I...I do not know..." Thorir said quietly. "Into the smoke...disappeared...I...I saw them take the girl first...heard her scream..."

"Wen...!" Odhran gasped.

"The others...they took as they...they rode by...bergelmirs..." Thorir murmured. "Tried to follow them..." He opened his eyes again, his fingers tightening against Odhran's. "They took Einar," he said, his voice and his expression stern and suddenly, remarkably coherent. "Like they...like they meant to...your friend, too...the boy."

"Pryce?" Odhran asked. He glanced at Arnora. "Why would they take them deliberately?"

“Because they...they are young,” Thorir told him. He raised his chin, looking toward Arnora. “They...killed the others but took the...the Seggr...and the young Rekk. All of them...”

“They are all Einar’s age,” Arnora whispered, her eyes enormous and stunned. “They knew Einar was among us. They have learned somehow he is Fjolnir’s heir. They took all of the Seggr, Thorir? Allr af drengarnir?” *All of the young men?*

Thorir nodded. “They...do not know his face...” he breathed. “But they...know his age...”

“Einar!” Arnora cried softly, terrified. She jerked away from Odhran, scrambling for the opening in the wagon.

“Arnora, no—!” Odhran cried, grabbing her as she tried to dart past him. He caught her about the waist and drew her back, and she fought with him, driving her fists against him, weeping in her sudden, horrified anguish.

“Let go of me!” she cried. “They took Einar! They took my brother! If they see his sword—his scabbard—they will know who he is! They will kill him! Let me go!”

“If they meant to kill him, they would have killed every man in this caravan,” Odhran told her, leaning close to her, tucking his cheek against hers. He felt her thrashing still between his arms, and she shuddered, weeping. He turned his face against hers, holding her. “If they meant to kill him, they would not have taken him, Arnora.”

“Then...then why...?” she whispered, drawing her hands to her face. “Why would they take him?” She moaned softly, sobbing. “Einar...!”

A second explosion ripped through the narrow chasm of the roadway outside of the wagon. Arnora shrieked, thrashing against Odhran again, and he folded himself over her reflexively. Again, the force of the blast nearly shattered Odhran's ear drums; he could feel it slamming in his head. Again, the earth beneath them thrummed and shuddered as blasted chunks of mountainside hurtled down to the ground. He could hear boulders whistling in the air; the crashing thunder of wood splintering as more wagons were smashed beneath a sudden rain of rocks and dirt.

A chunk of granite the side of well-tended pony slammed into the back of their wagon, punching through the wooden frame and rear axle, splintering the thick beams like dried kindling, and sending a spray of splinters, dirt and grit spewing through the wagon. Arnora screamed, cowering against Odhran, clutching at him with enough terror in her fingertips to leave bruises against his forearms. The ground shook beneath them with the impact; the edge of the massive rock only missed Thorir's injured, outstretched legs by less than two feet.

Odhran twisted, moving for Thorir, drawing Arnora with him, keeping her pinned against his chest. He hooked his free arm across Thorir's chest and pulled the man toward him, trying to shield him.

They listened to the hissing spatter of debris pelting the belly of the wagon above them. More dense dust and smoke clogged the air and filled the wagon, choking them. They heard more screams from beyond the shelter of the wood as the resonant, rolling thunder of the detonation faded into silence, as the last of the boulders and enormous chunks of stone tumbled from the sky. They huddled together, gasping and coughing for breath, trembling with terror. Arnora squirmed in Odhran's grasp, turning to face him.

She drew her arms about his ribs and hugged him fiercely, burying her face against the side of his throat as she sobbed.

“It...it is alright...” he whispered, closing his eyes against the sting of grit. He tried to draw the blankets over Thorir’s face, to protect him from the dust. He stroked Arnora’s hair, canting his face down to kiss her forehead. “It is alright, Arnora...it is alright...”

When the echo of the explosion had subsided, a peculiar, eerie calm descended upon the world. Odhran could hear faint cries from beyond the wagon, but not many. He realized in horrified dismay that there were probably not many left among the Enghan caravan to cry out; they had either been butchered by the Torachan cavalry or abducted, stolen like Einar, Pryce and Wen. He heard no footfalls at first, no more pounding of bergelmir feet or rushed tromping of imperial sabatons against the ground. The patter of dirt against the wagon waned into silence, and there was nothing but that uncanny, disturbing stillness, a weight in the air as palpable as the dust and smoke.

“Are you alright?” Odhran croaked at Arnora. He felt her hair brush against his face as she nodded.

“Are...are you?” she whispered, drawing her hands to her face as she choked.

“Yes,” he said. He felt her hands move again, her arm hooking about her neck, her other hand pressing against his cheek, his dirt-encrusted beard.

“Oh, Odhran...” she gasped, her breath fluttering with tears. She tucked her face against him, her forehead against his cheek, and he held her.

“It is alright,” he whispered to her, kissing her hair. “I am here, Arnora. It is going to be alright.” He looked down at Thorir, drawing the blankets back for a moment.

“Thorir,” he said. Thorir’s eyes were closed, but he opened them blearily, blinking at the sound of his name. Odhran leaned down, reaching for him, cradling Thorir’s cheek against his palm. “Ert thu granda?” *Are you hurt?*

Thorir closed his eyes. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, and he managed a soft snort of laughter. “Ek...ek engr...at buar meth...bjorn’sterkr...” he murmured softly, reaching up and brushing his fingers feebly against Odhran’s hand. *I was hurt to begin with, strong bear.*

The ground trembled beneath them, and Odhran jerked his head toward the dim daylight filtering in through the shattered end of the wagon, seeping around the corners of the fallen boulder. He heard a thrumming like drumbeats, and heard voices, men’s voices shouting out. Arnora heard it, too, and she shrank back against the wall of the wagon.

“Odhran...!” she gasped.

“Riders!” He reached behind him, his hands fumbling until his fingers brushed against the butt of an an’daga. He snatched it in hand and drew it before him, pointing the barrel at the far end of the wagon. They were vulnerable now, the shelter the wagon had offered compromised. A passing Torachan rider on bergelmir might be able to see them around the boulder, the smashed corner of the cart.

He looked over his shoulder at Arnora, wide-eyed with fright. “Pull Thorir back,” he whispered to her. “Keep quiet—do not let them find us!”

She nodded, drawing her arms about Thorir and struggling to draw him further back in the wagon. He moaned as he moved, not much of a sound, but enough to seize both Arnora’s heart and Odhran’s with sudden, bright terror.

“Oh, Thorir, please...” Arnora whispered, lowering her face over his, tucking herself over him. “Please...do not...please...!”

Odhran heard a loud voice cry out from near the wagon and he froze, his finger poised against the trigger of the pistol. He was so frightened, his heart slamming in frantic rhythm beneath his breast that he thought at first his mind played a trick on him.

“Einar!” the voice shouted out.

Arnora lifted her face, her eyes flown wide.

“Einar! Arnora! Hvar eruth ther?”

“Fathir!” Arnora stared at Odhran, as confused as he was.

“Wen!” Odhran heard Aedhir scream, his voice shrill with panic. “Pryce! Odhran! Where are you?”

“Captain Fainne!” Odhran cried, relaxing his grip on the pistol, lowering his arm. He scrambled to get his feet beneath him and yelped as he smacked his head sharply against the belly of the wagon. He staggered clumsily, slapping his hands against the chunk of granite that had struck the wagon. He wriggled, trying to get around it and climb outside.

“Captain Fainne!” he shouted, and as he whooped in a mouthful of dust and smoke, he began to choke. “Captain Fainne! Here! We are here!”

“Fathir!” Arnora cried, right behind him, scrabbling against the stone, her hands pawing against his legs as she struggled to follow Odhran. “Fathir!”

Odhran managed to haul his head and shoulders from around the crumbled stone. His waist got lodged, the jagged corners of broken wagon planks digging painfully into his back, and he squirmed. He could not see anything through the thick

cloud of dust, but he raised his hand, gasping for breath. “Captain Fainne! Eirik!” he cried out.

He saw a silhouetted form loom out of the smoke, and he cowered. It was a bergelmir, moving swiftly toward him, and he watched a smaller figure—the rider—leap from the animal’s back before it even came fully into view. The figure rushed toward the wagon, and the first thing to appear clearly out of the dust was a broad length of sword, clasped in hand and poised at the ready, pointing directly at him.

“Bugger me—!” Odhran hissed, trying to scuttle back, his stomach shoved painfully against the rock. *It is a Torachan! Mother Above—it is a legionnaire!*

He looked over his shoulder, frantic and terrified toward Arnora, opening his mouth and drawing in breath to scream at her to throw him a pistol. He heard the blade of the sword smack against the stone, the scuttling of boot soles against the granite as the rider tried to climb the angular slope of the boulder, and he jerked toward the sound, balling his hands into fists, meaning to at least go down swinging.

If it bloody ends like this, I will fight you, you bastard rot, he thought, his heart flailing in panicked alarm. *I will beat you bloody rot senseless while you run me through—*

A hand fell against his own, and a man leaned forward, his features coming into view through the swirling dust and smoke. Odhran recoiled; it took his mind nearly a full, startled breath to realize, and then his eyes flew wide, his fists relaxing.

“Captain Fainne!”

“Odhran!” Aedhir cried, throwing his sword aside. He had clambered up the boulder, leaning his body across the side of the stone, and his hand tightened against

Odhran's. His arm hooked around Odhran's neck, and as he embraced him, Odhran drew his arms around the Captain's shoulders, shuddering against him.

"Captain Fainne...!" he gasped again, pressing his cheek against Aedhir's shoulder.

"Hoah, lad," Aedhir whispered, clutching at him. He pulled away, cupping his hands against Odhran's cheeks, his eyes filled with tears, his mouth spread in a broad smile. "You live. Hoah, Odhran...lad, you are alive...!"

He hugged Odhran again fiercely, and then turned over his shoulder, shouting out into the gloom. "Eirik! Here! They are over here!"

Aedhir took Odhran's hands in his own, and helped haul the younger man loose from the shattered wagon. Eirik appeared out of the shadows just as Odhran's boots stumbled clumsily against the ground, and Arnora's hands appeared in the margin of space he had just vacated, groping desperately for escape.

"Fathir!" she cried. "Fathir!"

"Arnora!" Eirik cried. He caught his daughter's hands and drew her, scrambling and staggering out of the wreckage. He seized her in his arms and lifted her from her feet, weeping as he held her in his arms. "Arnora," he wept, kissing her cheek, her ear, her hair. "Dottir, ert thu granda?" *Are you hurt?*

"Thorir is inside, too, Captain," Odhran told him. "He is hurt, sir...his leg is broken, I think, and he..."

"Is Wen there, too?" Aedhir asked. He turned to the ruined wagon, stepping toward it. "Wen? Pryce?"

Odhran caught him by the sleeve. "They are not there," he said softly, pained, and Aedhir turned to him, bewildered and frightened. "Captain Fainne, Thorir said he saw them..."

"Where is your brother?" Eirik asked Arnora, setting her on her feet once more, holding her face between his palms. His face was battered, his beard streaked with blood and dirt, his tears cleaving paths through the dust and grit caked on his cheeks. "Is Einar hurt? Is he...?"

Her face twisted with grief, and his voice faded in anguished realization. "Where is your brother?" he asked again, his voice hoarse and stricken. He looked at Aedhir in alarm.

"They took him, Fathir," Arnora whimpered, bursting into new tears. She fell against Eirik, shuddering, clapping her hands over her face. "They...they took Einar!"

"What?" Aedhir gasped, stunned anew. He stared at Odhran in helpless horror.

"And Pryce, sir," Odhran said softly. "And Wen, too. They jumped clear when the wagon overturned. I tried to find them, but Thorir told us..."

"He said he saw the Torachans take them," Arnora wept. "Thorir told us he...he saw them taking all of the Seggr, Fathir, and...and the young Rekk! All of them, Fathir!"

"Grimnir bjargar oss," Eirik whispered. *Grimnir save us.*

"They knew, Eirik," Odhran told him grimly, limping toward the Hersir, drawing his gaze. "They do not know Einar's face, but they know how old he is. They knew somehow...they knew he traveled with us for Elbeuf."

"No..." Eirik gasped, anguished, fresh tears spilling from his eyes.

“If they know who he is, then they must know about the sword,” Arnora told him. “Fathir, if...if they can read the runes on the hilt, they...they...”

“They will know who he is,” Eirik whispered. He staggered away from Arnora in shock, his feet stumbling in the dirt. He fell upon his knees. “They...they will know...” he said, trembling. “Einar...”

“Who he is?” Aedhir asked, confused. “Eirik, I do not understand. What do you mean ‘who he is?’”

“Einar is kin to the konung,” Eirik whispered, hanging his head, shoving the heels of his hands against his brow. He uttered a low, agonized moan, and his shoulders shuddered. “I tried to keep him from it. I...I tried to keep it secret...my...my boy safe...”

“He is Konung Fjolnir’s heir, Captain,” Odhran said quietly, laying his hand against Aedhir’s shoulder. “The king has no sons of his own—two months ago, he named Einar his heir. The empire learned of it somehow. They knew, and they came for him.”

“I have feared for this,” Eirik said. “I have tried to keep him from it, but he does not understand. He is so young yet, and he did not understand the danger to him...”

He stared at Aedhir in broken implore. “They took my son!” he cried. Arnora fell onto her knees beside him, and he clung to her, weeping. “Grimnir help, me, they...they have taken my boy...!”

Chapter Eleven

The initial explosion set off by the Torachans from the cliffs overlooking the roadway had sent tons of stone, dirt and rubble collapsing into the narrow ravine. It had effectively cut off Eirik, Aedhir and nearly half of the Enghan Herr regiment traveling with the caravan from the wagon train. While Odhran, Thorir and those who remained alive after the blast had struggled and fought with an onslaught of seemingly hundreds of Torachan cavalry soldiers, Eirik, Aedhir and the others trapped on the other side of this imposing wall of rubble had struggled frantically to cross it and reach their friends and loved ones. They had been able to hear the screams, the sounds of battle, and they had been desperate in their efforts. Nearly twenty among them who had been unharmed in the detonation were killed trying to scramble over and around the rubble; the mound was unstable, and the weight of so many men and bergelmirs moving with such urgency was enough to trigger slides of earth and stone, shifting the enormous tumble of boulders, crushing anyone and anything in its path as it moved.

The second explosion had come from behind the caravan. It was a cruel and deliberate effort on the part of the empire to keep anyone who had survived from following them as they retreated, taking with them nearly forty young men and boys, the Enghan's Seggr and young Rekkir warriors—their sons.

The carnage left in their wake was nearly too horrible to be believed. As the smoke and dust began to thin and wane, they could clearly see the devastation the Torachans had brought upon the little caravan of Enghan. No wagon remained untouched by falling debris. There were bodies everywhere, heaped together in broken,

tangled piles, crushed by stones, felled by spear or imperial sword. Bergelmirs and oxen lay sprawled among the rubble. Supplies and simple, sentimental belongings were scattered everywhere, from clothing and food to toys packed for children who made their way to Elbeuf by knarr. The stink of blood remained strong and apparent in the air, and the last of the Enghan Herr, forty-two Rekr warriors, the straggled survivors of the vicious assault, stumbled about together, wide-eyed with shock.

“Fyrirgefar...mik...” Thorir whispered to Eirik. *Forgive me.* They had managed to move him from beneath the ruined wagon, but such effort had little purpose. The few wagons they had left among them were on the other side of the mountainous debris, unable to cross the rubble. The Enghan were gathering their injured as best they could, and rigging together makeshift litters with lengths of broken wood and blankets so that either one man could drag an injured fellow behind him, or two could carry one between them back to the wagons.

“Thegjar,” Eirik said to him softly, gently. *Hush.* He knelt beside his friend, holding Thorir’s hand, keeping his other pressed against his forehead to comfort him.

“Ek...freist gaeta Einar...” Thorir whimpered, closing his eyes and sucking in a hissing breath through his teeth against a spasm of pain. *I tried to protect Einar.* “Hoefat hann...ok thik...” *I failed him...and you...*

“Nei, Thorir,” Eirik said, tears in his eyes. *No.* He leaned over, pressing his lips against Thorir’s brow. “Althri.” *Never.* “Munu’um fylgja tha. Mumu’um finna Einar—finna allr af tha ok foerar tha aprt.” *We will follow them. We will find Einar—find them all and bring them back again.*

“How could this have happened?” cried one of the Enghan. His name was Heri, and he was Styrimathr of Thorir’s kyn, the Dalr. He had been horrified to see his leader, Thorir, in such a dire state, and he paced about, distraught. “How could the empire have known to find us—that we would be following this route to Elbeuf? That Einar would be among us?”

Heri stopped and turned to Aedhir and Odhran, standing together nearby with Thierley, who had been fortunate enough to be riding near the front of the ranks in the caravan, and had avoided serious injury in both the blast and the crossing of the debris mound. Of the ten crewmen from the *a’Maorga’s* longboat, only the three of them remained. They had found poor Semias Lehern and Sengel Jukes crushed beneath rubble. Duffin Nevyne and Euan Fancott were unaccounted for; they were Pryce’s age, and like Pryce, young enough in appearance to pass as teens. Aedhir suspected they had been abducted as well, taken by the Torachans in the misnotion they were young Enghan warriors.

After a long moment of Heri’s unfriendly regard, Thierley stepped forward, returning the man’s scowl, his large hands folding into fists. “You have something you would like to say?” he asked. The events of the day had left even the ordinarily unflappable Thierley rattled and on edge, and he met Heri’s gaze with menacing intent.

“Thierley, stand down,” Aedhir said, hooking his hand against the master-at-arms’ elbow. “There has been enough blood spilled today.”

“There is about to be some rot damn more, if he is implying what I think he is,” Thierley said sharply.

“How did you do it?” Heri asked, his own hands closing. “How did you get word to them? One of your lot who escaped by boat? Or did the legions just follow you, keeping a wary distance—using you to trick us?”

“Heri, that is enough,” Eirik told him firmly, rising to his feet.

“Hersir Thorir has said all along they are Torachan spies, Eirik,” Heri cried at him. “You have not believed him. What better proof than this do you need?” He swept his hand out, indicating the rubble and carnage.

“Hoah, that is it...” Thierley growled, stomping forward, drawing his right fist back.

“Thierley—stand down!” Aedhir snapped, grasping Thierley’s forearm between his hands and stumbling forward in tow with Thierley.

“Heri—thu haettar!” Thorir shouted, summoning from some deep reservoir of strength and resolve. *Stop!* He sat up, shoving his elbows beneath him. He glared at his Strymathr. Heri blinked at him, startled and caught off guard.

“No...no more...” Thorir said, struggling to hold himself upright. “There will be...no more talk against these men...from me...or my kyn.”

“Thorir, you are delirious,” Heri said, hurrying to his side, falling onto his knees beside him. Thorir caught him by the throat, enough force left in his hand to crush a warbling cry from between Heri’s lips.

“There will be no more, Heri,” Thorir hissed at him, his brows furrowed. “I was wrong. These men...they are no more Torachan than...than I am.” He released Heri, and turned his head, meeting Odhran’s gaze. “That one...saved my life...” he said softly. “For the offenses I...I have offered him...his friends...this boy answered with kindness and...courage...the sort I...I can only long for. I am not fit to be his servant.”

“Thorir...” Heri whispered, stricken and confounded.

“They...did not betray us,” Thorir told him. He looked at Eirik and said one word:
“*Nordri.*”

Eirik knelt beside him again, helping Thorir lay back. “Did you see them?”

Thorir shook his head. The effort he had made to reprimand his soldier sapped whatever precious little strength remained in him. His eyelids fluttered closed and he moaned softly. “Who...who else could it be?” he whispered to Eirik, holding his friend’s hand. “They...they came from the same Motinn...as our own Tithendar. They would know...about our byrs...that we...we were in Lith...that we would bring our people...to Elbeuf before turning for Eng...for war...”

“Orbornar!” Eirik said in dismayed realization, his brows drawn, caught between anguish and rage. *Bastards!* “They would have known about Einar,” he said, and Thorir nodded.

“They...would be angry enough...with Fjólnir...to betray him,” Thorir murmured.

“Nordri?” Aedhir asked, genuflecting beside Thorir.

Eirik turned to him. “Northern clans,” he said. “North of the Nordr Fjell in Mikillfit and H’rossjord. They want the throne—and married the Konung’s daughters to claim it. Fjólnir named Einar his heir to keep it from them, keep it in his clan.” Eirik’s face filled with sorrow. “I knew the Nordri would not simply walk away and leave it be. They have wanted the crown for ages. I knew they would be furious to learn about Einar. Fjólnir underestimated them, and what they would do against him for that offense.”

“Heimskr saurr,” Thorir whispered with a frown. *Stupid dung.* “Fjólnir althri hugsar...athr vikjar.” *Fjólnir never thinks before he acts.*

“Fjolnir made his announcement two months ago, at the Motinn when the kyns agreed to war,” Eirik told Aedhir.

Aedhir arched his brow. “Plenty of time for these northern kyns to betray you to the empire.”

Eirik nodded grimly. “And for the empire to reach here, the Ve’dal valley to wait for us. Those legions in the south might have even been just a distraction to delay us, occupy us, give the others enough time to cross the Keiliselgr Fjell mountains.”

“Why would the Nordri betray you?” Odhran asked. “What benefit could it have to them? If the empire defeats you, Engjold belongs to them—not the Nordri.”

“Ulus still keeps its royal house in Kharhorin to the south,” Eirik said. “Their Kagan, Targutai Bokedei retains his title, his armies, his authority in his land.”

“So long as he follows Torachan rules and laws,” Aedhir said.

“Tempered power is still power,” Eirik told him. “The Nordri might take whatever they can get if they think it will get them the throne of Vornirtindr. Fjolnir’s people—my people, the A’Mithal from the midlands of Engjold—claimed the throne by marriage, not by blood. By blood, it belonged to the Nordri kyns—they have never forgotten this, and never forgiven us fully for taking it from them.”

“They will use Einar to get it back,” Aedhir said, frowning. “If they have told the empire about your son, they have probably told them about the war, too.”

“Yes,” Eirik said, sighing heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose between the tips of his forefinger and thumb. “Grimnir protect us, all of our Herr from every kyn in Engjold is likely marching headlong to their deaths. The empire has probably fortified their border with every man they could summon.”

“The empire will trade Einar for Fjornir’s surrender,” Aedhir said.

“Of his armies, yes,” Eirik said. “And when he agrees, they will take his throne and give it to the Nordri.” He snorted softly, his brows furrowed, the corners of his mouth turned down. “Their reward for their deceit—for their betrayal of their own people. Once the Nordri have what they want, they will give the empire what it wants—gersimi, and all of the means to make it.”

“Will he agree?” Aedhir asked, laying his hand against Eirik’s shoulder. “Will Fjornir surrender to them?”

“If he thinks harm will come to Einar? Yes,” Eirik said. “I am certain of it. He did not just name Einar his heir because of blood—he named him because he has always loved Einar, and Arnora and Bjarki, too. He used to travel in disguise from Vornirtindr when they were small and visit with us in our byr. He has not been able to see Einar for many years, but he loves him still.”

“We have to go,” Aedhir told him, tightening his grip on Eirik’s shoulder. “They took my boy, too. And my daughter.”

“You will help us, then?” Eirik asked.

Aedhir met his gaze. “Whatever I have is yours, Eirik,” he said. “Whatever I can summon, whatever I can do.”

“You said this is not Tiralainn’s battle,” Eirik said.

“Maybe not,” Aedhir said, his brows drawing gravely. “But it is mine now. It was mine the moment they touched my children.”

Eirik clapped his hand against Aedhir’s. “We will get them back,” he said. “By all that I hold, we will get them all back.”

“Where would the Torachans bring them?” Aedhir asked.

“From here? Back through the Keiliselgr, across the Merki Isthmus and into Enthimork,” Eirik said. “From there, likely east through Eng and then south into Ulus. The closest imperial city is Kharhorin, in the Taiga. Our Herr will be gathering near there—just west of the Nordr foothills in Eng.”

“How long to get there?” Aedhir asked.

“Three weeks at least by foot,” Eirik said. “With the bergelmirs that have survived? Maybe two—if the weather holds in our favor.”

“How fast can one of your knarrs reach the Muir Fuar from Elbeuf?” Aedhir asked him. “And cross it from there to Tiralainn?”

“We would sail north from Elbeuf,” Eirik said. “Out over Rockall, across the Chagan Sea until the northern currents find us and draw us southwest.”

Aedhir nodded. Eirik was talking about the Ionium currents—the very forces of wind and water that had brought the *a’Maorga* to Capua could swiftly deliver the Enghan’s small knarrs across the Muir Fuar sea.

“Maybe three weeks,” Eirik offered in estimation. He arched his brow. “I thought your king would be unwilling.”

“He might,” Aedhir said. “But there is one who could convince him—a sort of ally to you already.” Eirik looked at him, perplexed. “The King of the Abhacan state of Tirurnua, Neisrod Baruch will be very interested—and concerned—once enlightened of the empire’s intentions to claim the recipe for black powder from you. They have only shared it with us in recent years, and he has expressly forbid Kierken share it with the empire.

“Neisrod does not trust Torach. He has his own army, his own fleet of armed ships—and he and my king, Kierken are as close as brothers. You can sail to Tirurnua—it will be easy if you follow the Ionium current south. I can write an implore you can deliver to Neisrod. Your people were allies to his ancestors once, and he perceives Torach as a potential enemy now. He will help us and he will convince Kierken to help us, as well. Even if they cannot reach Eng in time, they can send their gunships to Cneas—to the heart of the empire itself.”

“And he will believe you at only your word?” Eirik asked.

“I have more than my word now,” Aedhir told him. “They have taken your son. There is no other purpose except to force your king to surrender his lands—and his recipe for gersimi. That makes it proof in my mind.” He smiled without humor, his brows narrowing all the more. “They have also abducted a commissioned officer of the Crown Navy, three of our citizens and murdered two others. That makes it personal.”

Eirik stood. He turned to Heri. “Can you bear him to the wagons?” he asked, nodding toward Thorir.

“Ja, Eirik,” Heri said.

“Do it—keep with him, and with my daughter. You will lead a group of ten Herr with the injured for Elbeuf. The rest of us will leave for the east as soon as our injured have been moved.”

“What of the dead?” Heri asked.

A shadow of sorrow crossed Eirik’s face and he looked down at the ground. “We must leave them,” he said softly. “Grimnir’s herjans’disir will find them—the great ladies of Asbith will lead them all to the glory of Vanaheim for their sacrifice. Light pyres in their

honor on the shores of the Chagan outside of Elbeuf.” He draped his hand against Heri’s shoulder, his expression grave. “Tell my uncle where we have gone, what has happened. If he has not sent his clan’s warriors already, tell him to make haste. We will meet him in Eng.”

“Ja,” Heri said again, nodding in deference.

Eirik turned to Aedhir, meeting his gaze. “Someone find this man a square of hide,” he shouted out. “Strike a fire—get some ashes that he might write.”

“I am going with you,” Tacita told Aedhir.

He had crossed over the mountainous pile of rocks and debris to reach her. She waited with the bergelmirs and remaining wagons, the few and straggled survivors that had been at the front of the caravan.

Aedhir’s brows lifted in implore. “Tacita...” he said, draping his hands against her shoulders.

She turned her head, her expression stricken as two Rekkir moved past them, carrying a litter between them bearing one of their injured fellows. The man was grievously injured, moaning and writhing weakly, his kyrtil soaked in blood. She looked at Aedhir again, her blue eyes round, her face ashen with horror. “I am coming with you,” she said again.

“You will be safe in Elbeuf,” he told her, and he touched her face. “Please, Tacita.”

“You need me,” she said. “There are none among you who know as much about the empire as I do. I worked for them—I sometimes traveled among their troops. I know

how they move, how they think. I have been to Kharhorin before. I know how the city is fortified, and I know where they would take prisoners.”

He fell silent, anguished, cradling her cheek against his palm.

“You need me, Aedhir,” she insisted.

“I need you alive,” he whispered, brushing his thumb against the cruel mark of her tattoo. “I need you safe. I...I cannot lose you, too.” He lowered his face, his eyes stinging with sudden tears. He had not wept yet for Pryce and Wen; the shock was still too new to his heart, too unfathomable for his mind. His defenses were beginning to crumble, and already he could feel the strain of grief and fury upon him. “Please,” he breathed. “They took my children, Tacita.”

She reached up, touching his face with her fingertips. She leaned toward him, her soft, delicate mouth settling gently against his. “You need me for that, too,” she whispered to him. There were tears in her eyes as she looked at him. “There are none among you who know more about that, either.”

He blinked at her, startled and confused. A tear spilled down her cheek and she uttered a quiet, fluttering gasp. “You are frightened for your children,” she said softly. “Aelwen and Pryce. I know, Aedhir.” She closed her eyes and hung her head. “The empire took my daughter, too, and I...I know your fear.”

“Your daughter?” he whispered, and she nodded. “Tacita, you have a daughter?”

She nodded, opening her eyes and looking at him, anguished. “Her name is Aurelia. They took her away from me. They...they took my daughter...”

Her voice dissolved and he moved toward her, drawing her into his arms. She clutched at him and Aedhir turned his face against her hair. “Tacita,” he breathed. “Why have you never told me?”

“There is nothing you could have done,” she said. She met his gaze, tears spilling down her cheeks. “They took her in Euboea, in the south. I...I was not supposed to have children. They give members of the donarium paelex some sort of elixir...a tonic when we are young, and it stills our wombs. I was not supposed to have children and that is why it was such a miracle to me and Marcus that Aurelia would be born to us.”

Aedhir looked at her in sudden realization. He knew who Marcus was, of course; he had been the young Median viatori Tacita had traveled with for the last decade.

“Marcus,” he said softly. “He was the father?”

“Yes,” Tacita said, nodding. “We did not mean for it to happen. It was strictly forbidden among the sacerdotium by temple code, but we did not think anyone would ever know. They did not, not for a long time. Aurelia is five. We kept her with us...kept her safe as we traveled, but two months ago, Torachan soldiers came to Galjin and they took us. There was nothing we could do. I...I do not know how they learned of it.” She stared at him, stricken. “The Pontifex punished us. They sent Marcus away—banished him in the company of imperial guards to the east, to a parish in Teutoni. I...I did not even get to see him...tell him good-bye.” Her voice fluttered, her breath shuddering and she lowered her face toward the ground.

“They sent me as far from him as they could,” she said. “They sent me to Capua, sold me to flesh traders. Marcus was born free, but I was born a slave. They made me a slave again.” She pressed her fingertips against her mouth, closing her eyes. “They

could have done whatever they wanted with me. Whatever they wanted, I would have bore it gladly, but they took my baby girl from me. I do not know what has become of her.”

“Tacita,” Aedhir said gently. At last he understand her pain, the tremendous sorrow he had sensed in her, the quiet tears she would offer in the night when she thought no one could hear her. He understood, and whatever defenses he had forced upon his heart to steel himself against the pain of his own loss shattered. He held her and began to weep. She trembled against him, as delicate and slender as a winter-barren maple branch, and he kissed her hair softly.

“I know what it is like to lose a child,” she breathed, lifting her chin against his chest. “I know what it is like to have one stolen from you...taken someplace where you are helpless to protect them...shamed of your own inability to keep them safe.” She brushed her fingertips against his face, his tears. “And I know you,” she whispered. “You will blame yourself for it, as I have blamed myself for my Aurelia. It is not your fault.”

He wept freely, and she held him, kissing his temple, his ear. “I am sorry,” he gasped at her, tangling his hands in her hair, shuddering against her. He wept for her loss and anguish; he wept for his own. “I...I am sorry, Tacita.”

“I cannot help my child,” she said. “But I can help yours, Aedhir. I can help you. Please, let me help you.” She pressed her forehead against his shoulder, holding him tightly. “I love you,” she said. “You have given me so much...more than anyone has ever...even Marcus. Please, I beg you. Let me help you.”

“I cannot lose you, too,” he said. “I...I could not bear it...”

She drew away from him, taking his face between her hands again. She kissed him deeply, and he pulled her against him, holding her fiercely, tasting her sorrow, the tears of her grief against his tongue. "You will not lose me," she promised, her lips brushing against his as she spoke. She tried to smile for him, caressing his cheek. "I belong to you...always, if you would have me, Aedhir."

He embraced her, lifting her feet from the ground. "Mother Above, I love you," he whispered, as she wrapped her arms around his neck. *I will get my children back*, he thought, closing his eyes, feeling her soft hair against his face. *By my breath, I will get Wen and Pryce back. And then I promise you, Tacita, with all that I have, we will find your child, too. I will bring her back to you.*

She kissed his ear, trembling in his arms. "I love you, too," she breathed.

"The runestones were right," Arnora told Odhran. They, too, had crossed the rubble and debris and stood together near one of the wagons, watching and waiting as the Enghan loaded their injured for transport to Elbeuf. They were nearly completed, and it was time for the Rekk who were riding east with Aedhir and Eirik to leave, including Odhran. This realization, this moment of farewell had left the young woman stricken and distraught.

She stood facing him, holding his hands with her own, her eyes filled with tears. "Einar's fortunes have changed for the worst, and you have lost those dear to you. You are going on a journey. You are leaving."

"You told me the rune of friendship and protection would help me," he said. She had been looking down at the torn, ragged hem of her dress, her eyes forlorn, but she

looked up at him now, his words drawing her gaze. He offered her hands gentle squeezes. “New friendships would guide me. Do you not remember? New friendships, Arnora.”

She blinked at him, her lip trembling, her tears welling. “Please, Odhran,” she whispered. “I do not want you to go.”

“Arnora,” he whispered gently, turning loose of her hand and touching her face, brushing his fingertips against her cheek. Her pleas nearly broke him; a woman had never begged anything of him before, unless one counted Wen, who usually only begged him to do things like abandon the university and join the Crown Navy.

“Take me with you,” she begged. “I want to go with my father. I want to go with you.”

“You have to go to Elbeuf,” he said softly. “We are going to war, Arnora, and it will not be safe for you to be with us.”

“I do not care,” she said, tears spilling down her cheeks. Her brows furrowed and she blinked down at her shoes, struggling to compose herself, her breath fluttering. “I am not helpless. I know how to fight—to wield a sword. Einar showed me last summer. He spent hours with me...days at a time showing me. He...he told me I was very good.” She uttered a soft, hurting noise and her hand darted to her mouth. “He told me I was very good,” she said again, whispering.

Odhran hooked his hand against the back of her head and drew her against his shoulder. She wept against his sleeve, trembling. “He will be alright,” Odhran whispered to her. “I will bring him back to you, Arnora. I promise you—all that I have—I will bring Einar back to you.”

Her arms slipped about his middle, her hands against his shoulder blades. "I do not want you to go, Odhran," she said again. "I do not want anything to happen to you."

He turned his cheek against the top of her head, her hair. "I do not want anything to happen to me, either," he said, and despite her tears, he heard her laugh softly, as he had hoped she might.

Arnora lifted her face, looking up at him. "I might never see you again," she said, mournfully. "What if you are killed...?"

"I will not be killed," he told her gently, offering her a promise they both knew he could not keep. Her words startled and touched him beyond measure; her fear and worry were as real and earnest in her words, her eyes as they had been when she spoke of her brother.

"You will not come back," she said. "Even if you survive, you will go home again. Back to Tiralainn." More tears fell, rolling down her cheeks, cleaving his heart. "You will leave us."

Mother Above, how could I leave you? he thought, anguished, caressing her face with the cuff of his fingers. *I think I love you, Arnora. Bloody rot it all, you are the most amazing woman I have ever met. I could never leave you.*

"I will come back," he told her softly. "I promise, Arnora."

She blinked at him, still so beautiful to him, even in her sorrow. She moved her arms, drawing them about his neck, and he held her. "I will come back for you," he promised, turning his face to speak against her ear.

He embraced her for a long moment, cherishing the simple comfort of her in his arms, pressed against him. When they drew apart, he touched her cheek with his palm and leaned toward her, her blue eyes upon him, holding his gaze.

“I will come back for you, Arnora,” he said again, and she lifted her chin, brushing her nose against his. His lips danced against hers; he felt the soft intake of her breath against his mouth, and then she drew against him, kissing him deeply, sweetly, stealing his very breath.

Pryce groaned, coming to as a Torachan soldier jerked roughly against him. He felt his legs slip from astride a bergelmir's shoulders, a saddle, and then his boot heels struck the ground. His knees buckled beneath him, and the Torachan grabbed him about his middle, hauling him upright. He stumbled, his vision bleary, his mind reeling as the soldier dragged him in tow. The Torachan shoved him forward, pushing him into a cluster of frightened young Enghan men gathered together like a clutch of rabbits caught from their den. Pryce stumbled and fell to the ground, dropping to his knees, catching himself with his hands.

His head ached. He pressed his palm against his brow and closed his eyes against the topsy-turvy landscape that greeted his gaze. His mouth tasted nasty, and he tried to spit. His sinuses, the narrow passageways and cavities behind his eyes were tender and throbbing. The Torachan had shoved something over his face when he had grabbed Pryce, a square of fabric soaked in some sort of liquid that had burned Pryce's nose as he had been forced to inhale it. Whatever it was, it had taken almost instantaneous hold on his mind. He had been struggling against his captor, thrashing

wildly, trying to scream for Wen, his boots flailing between the open air and the bergelmir's flank. When the soldier had clapped his hand over Pryce's mouth and forced his head back against his shoulder, when Pryce had breathed in a searing lungful of whatever tainted the scrap of cloth, he had faded into darkness, his mind winking out like a candle snuffed by the wind, his body falling still and limp in his captor's grasp.

Wen! he thought, and his eyes flew wide in alarm. The Torachans had grabbed her before Pryce had even regained his wind or wits in the wake of the explosion. He had dim, groggy recollection of leaping from the wagon and cowering against the ground, his hands thrown over his head as boulders and pelting debris had rained upon the caravan. He had landed hard in his tumble from the wagon, jarring the senses from his skull, the breath from his lungs. He had sat up, dazed and confused, squinting against the sting of grit, the thick cloud of dust and smoke that had filled the air, and he had heard Wen scream, her voice shrill with bright terror.

"Wen," he whispered, lifting his head from the ground. He tried to stand, stumbling dizzily in place, keeping his palm against his brow. He looked around, bewildered and frightened, but all he saw were Enghan men around him, none of them more than boys. They were all ashen and stricken, their faces streaked with grime and blood, battered and bruised. They huddled together, about a dozen of them, including Pryce. Another group of Enghan youths stood nearby, and another beyond them, all of them kept separated from one another, and flocked close together by a seemingly countless swarm of armor-plated imperial troops.

He did not see Wen anywhere, and he staggered forward, shrugging past the Enghan, his heart seized with panic. As he started to break away from the group, a

Torachan soldier planted his palm firmly against Pryce's shoulder and shoved him backwards. Pryce's balance was only tenuous at best to begin with, as the effects of the drug they had given him waned, and he stumbled, tripping over his own feet and landing on his rump, his legs sprawled before him.

"Where are you going, little Enghan rot?" the guard asked him, sneering at him. He shoved the pad of his thumb against the lip of his helm and situated it comfortably against his brow. "Keep in your place, laddie, lest you want to see yourself run through."

"Please," Pryce said to him, drawing his legs beneath him, kneeling against the ground. The guard blinked at him, visibly startled by his address in the common tongue. "Please, you...you took a girl..." He stumbled to his feet again and moaned softly as his head swam. He struggled to clear his mind, forcing himself to meet the soldier's gaze. "You took a girl..." he said again.

"There are no girls here—get back in the fold," the Torachan said to him. He shoved Pryce again, sending him floundering backwards. Pryce felt someone grab him, lean but strong arms wrapping about his middle, saving him from a fall. Pryce groaned, his knees buckling, and he heard whoever was behind him grunt softly against his ear.

"Get on your feet, Pryce," the person said. It was a familiar voice and Pryce turned his face, blinking in bewilderment.

"Einar?" he whispered.

The young man nodded. "Get on your feet," he said again. "Come on now..."

With Einar's help, Pryce managed to get his legs beneath him. Einar let Pryce lean heavily against him, catching Pryce's hand against his own and drawing his arm about his shoulders to support him.

“Are you alright?” Einar asked him softly.

Pryce nodded. “My...my head,” he murmured, brushing his fingertips against his brow and wincing. “Feels like it...it is full of cobwebs.”

“They gave us something when they took us,” Einar said, his brows drawn, his expression grim. “They put a cloth over your mouth?”

Pryce nodded again. “Burned my nose,” he whispered.

“It will wane,” Einar told him. “I am just now feeling steadier, and I only came to awhile ago.”

Pryce looked around them. They were in the Keiliselgr Fjell again, deep in the mountains from the looks of things. There was no sign of the Ve'dal valley; nothing for as far as the eye could see except for an overlapping horizon of towering mountain peaks and snow-draped crests of granite. It had only been early morning when they had been attacked; by the looks of the waning sunlight, it was now late afternoon, approaching dusk. He blinked at Einar in confusion.

“They are taking us east?” he asked.

Einar nodded. “Back to the Merki Isthmus and into Enthimork, I would guess.”

Pryce glanced about again. He had never seen so many imperial troops in all of his life. The soldiers were everywhere, tromping about on foot, or riding about on the lumbering spines of bergelmirs.

“They are bellatori—imperial infantrymen,” Einar told him. “Two maniples at least of them—four hundred men.”

“They took Wen,” Pryce said. “Have you seen her? Do you know what happened to her?”

Einar blinked at him, his expression stricken. “Wen?” He looked around, his eyes wide and frantic. “She is here? I have not seen her. I have not seen anyone except men from the caravan. Most of them are Seggr. There are some Rekk, as well, but they are all young.”

“What do they want?” Pryce asked. He tried to pull away from Einar, straining to look around him for any sign of Wen.

Einar held him firmly, drawing him against him again. “I do not know,” he said. “Do not, Pryce. Keep still.”

“They have Wen, damn it,” Pryce said, turning to him, his brows drawing together. “I have to find her. If they have bloody touched her, I will...”

“If they have her, there is nothing we can do,” Einar told him softly, lifting his chin and speaking directly against Pryce’s ear. “Not now—not here. There are thirty-seven of us by my count and four hundred of them. I would say the odds would be in their favor in a fracas. They let us keep our swords, even—that is how confident they are.” Einar draped his hand against the pommel of his blade. His expression softened as he saw the anger and anguish in Pryce’s face. “We will find her,” he whispered. “We will find her somehow, Pryce—I promise.”

A loud voice boomed out, speaking in Enghan, startling Einar and Pryce. “Hvat eigum her?” a man shouted. *What have we here?* Pryce could see him, a tall, strapping man with chestnut hair and a hastily plaited beard, dressed in the clothes and leather armor of the Enghan Herr. A group of Enghan men walked with him as he approached, all of them passing freely and undetained among the Torachan soldiers, all of them regarding the young men from Lith with scornful expressions and disdainful sneers.

“Who are they, Einar?” Pryce whispered.

“*Orbornar*,” Einar hissed, his brows furrowing, his grip against his pommel tightening.

“What?” Pryce asked.

“I said they are bastards—Hildofar, one of the Nordri kyns,” Einar whispered. He nodded once at the men. “See the brooches they wear against their breasts, marked with the emblem of the wolf? That is their kyn mark.”

“They are Enghan?” Pryce asked.

Einar turned his face and spat against the ground, scowling. “They have no right to call themselves such.”

“They are the ones who married your king’s daughters,” Pryce said.

Einar nodded. “Yes—hoping to claim his crown.”

“What are they doing here?” Pryce asked, watching as the Hildofar men began to seize some of the young men in their group in turn, laying their hands against the boys’ shoulders and barking to them in sharp imperative.

“I would say they are betraying us to the empire,” Einar seethed, his brows furrowing all the more.

Groups of Hildofar had spread out among the clusters of young men, searching them. The Torachan soldiers had allowed the young Enghan captives to keep their weapons, as Einar had pointed out, but now the Hildofar took them away, wrenching swords, daggers and axes from belts, tossing them on the ground. They would study each weapon in turn, grasping blades by scabbards and peering closely at the inscribed

hilts and sheaths, shouting out each young man's name while an imperial scribe hurried along behind them, marking each name down in a ledger.

"Bastard cowards," Einar said softly, enraged. "Deceiving their own people. They have no honor."

Pryce watched the Nordri men jerk a sword loose from a boy's waist and brandish it aloft, reading the rune carvings along the pommel and hilt aloud. "This blade belongs to Ivladi Ulfheidinson—may the blessings of Tyr grace this steel and see it true."

The Hildofar guffawed at this, shaking their heads. The largest among them, the one whose voice had first drawn Pryce's gaze shoved the boy back among the others. He tossed the sword aside, and it clattered into a mounting pile.

Konung Fjolnir has daughters—three of them—but no sons, Einar had told them only earlier that morning. His sjonar cast the runes and told him he should name me his heir until his wife gives him a boy of his own. That way the throne would remain in his kinline.

Fjolnir only just announced it at the Motinn two months ago, when all of the clans agreed to face the empire together. He sent word to the kyns by falcon and sent the sword to me.

The Nordri Hersirs were probably furious to learn of it, Arnora had said quietly, her expression troubled.

The A'Mithal claimed the throne from the Nordri through marriage and they have always hoped to take it back from us, Einar had said.

Pryce blinked in sudden, startled realization. “Einar,” he whispered, turning his face slightly, keeping his eyes fixed on the Hildofar. “Give me your sword.”

“What?” Einar blinked at him, bewildered.

“They are looking for your sword,” Pryce breathed. “They are looking for *you*, Einar.”

Einar stared at him, his eyes widening with shock. He looked toward the Hildofar, his brows furrowing, his hands closing into furious fists. “Orbornar,” he hissed again. *Bastards.*

“They must have made a deal with the empire, told them about the war your people are planning,” Pryce said. “The empire must think they can force your king to surrender if they have you—his heir.”

“And if Fjornir surrenders, the empire will claim Engjold,” Einar whispered.

“I do not think so...not exactly,” Pryce said quietly, drawing Einar’s gaze. “The Nordri are helping them. They led them to us. They are reading the rune inscriptions—the names—on your weapons. They must expect something in return.”

“I know what they are expecting,” Einar said with a frown. “Fjornir’s throne.”

“There is only one reason Torach would promise them that, agree to barter with them,” Pryce said. “Gersimi, Einar—black powder. The Nordri will teach the empire to make black powder if they are given Fjornir’s throne.”

“Grimnir gaetar oss,” Einar whispered. *Grimnir protect us.*

The Hildofar grabbed another young man, and he yelped as he was dragged forward, stumbling in their rough tow.

“Give me your sword,” Pryce said again, looking at Einar.

“But they will think you are me,” Einar said.

“I know,” Pryce told him, holding his gaze.

Einar’s brows furrowed. “I am unafraid of them,” he hissed. “Let them find it with me. Let them do their worst for it. I am—”

“You are too important to your people, Einar,” Pryce whispered, leaning over, speaking so near to Einar, his lips brushed against the younger man’s ear. “Let them think they caught you—let them take me in your place. I can waste their time. I can fool them. If they try to barter with me as Fjolnir’s heir, it will not work for long. He will know I am not you. Your people will still have a chance, Einar.”

Einar blinked at him, stricken. “No, Pryce,” he whispered, shaking his head. “No, I...I cannot let you...they might hurt you...”

“They cannot do anything to me,” Pryce told him quietly. “If they try, I will tell them who I am. They cannot find you without your sword—not with any certainty—and they cannot touch me. I am a commissioned officer in the Crown Navy of Tiralainn. Any offense against me can be construed as an act of war against my king. Torach will not risk that, not without black powder to fight us. They will not have black powder without the Nordri—without you, Einar.”

He spoke with firm confidence, conviction he did not feel. He was lying through his teeth; Kierken could no more declare war on the empire for Pryce’s abduction, or any harm that came to him because of it, than he could for Rhyden Fabhcun’s—and Rhyden had at least had the benefit of being the king’s friend going for him. But Pryce did know that if the empire mistook him for Einar, they could not use the leverage of Fjolnir’s heir to force the Enghan’s surrender. The Enghan could still fight the empire.

There was a chance they could yet defeat Torach, and by doing so, keep them from black powder.

They are attacking the Enghan because they think they can get it easier that way—the formula for Abhacan black powder, Odhran had told him. If they get it, they will come for us.

What Pryce was doing was reckless and foolish and could very well see him killed by the empire if and when they learned the truth. It was something bold and rash—something Aedhir would do if he was in Pryce's place, and something Pryce, by his inherent, rational nature, would have tried desperately to prevent. Even as he spoke, whispering to Einar, his mind screamed at him: *What are you doing? Have you gone bloody daft? Shut up! You will get yourself killed!*

I have to do this, he thought, his brows furrowing. I have to. If the empire finds Einar, they can force the Enghan to surrender—and if they do, they will have the means to make black powder. They will have the means to attack Tiralainn.

Einar was quiet, blinking at him, his dark eyes round and troubled. The Hildofar seized a boy standing near to them; they had nearly reached Pryce and Einar in their search.

I am an officer in the Crown Navy, Pryce told himself firmly. I swore an oath to my kingdom and my Crown to protect Tiralainn. I have to do this. I have to.

This would have been Aedhir's rationale, the argument Aedhir would have used to counter Pryce's protests. Pryce's own argument to himself was somewhat simpler, but equally as poignant: *Wen is here somewhere among these soldiers. I have to find*

her. Maybe they are keeping her separate from us—maybe if they think I am Einar, they will bring me to her, keep me with her. I have to do this for Wen.

“Give me your sword,” Pryce whispered to Einar.

Einar did not move; he did not speak for a long moment. At last, he reached down, slipping his hands between his hip and Pryce’s, using Pryce’s body to shield his movements as he quickly unfettered his scabbard.

“Tie it to my belt,” Pryce breathed, glancing over his shoulder. “Hurry, Einar.”

“I am trying,” Einar whispered, and Pryce could feel him tugging against his belt, his fingers fumbling with the straps of hide on the sheath. He could hear approaching footsteps; the Hildofar had made short work of searching their last captive and were coming for the next.

“Hurry,” Pryce hissed urgently.

“I am,” Einar said.

“Komr her,” snapped one of the Hildofar and Pryce felt large, heavy hands clamp against his shoulders, jerking him away from Einar. He stumbled along as the Enghan man hauled him away from the others. Einar stared after him, his eyes enormous and stricken.

“Takar brandarnir af hann,” said the larger man, who was obviously the group’s Fylkir, or leader. While the one Hildofar jerked against Pryce’s belt, loosening the knots Einar had only just tightened, the Fylkir reached out, closing his broad hand painfully against Pryce’s jaw, forcing his head back. “Vaenn litt einn,” he said, leaning close enough to Pryce’s face that Pryce could smell the pungent stink of his breath. He did not understand what the man said; his comprehension of the Enghan language was

fairly limited, and the Hildofar spoke more swiftly than the people in Lith, with a much stronger, more distinctive lilting accent. He thought he understood *litt einn*; Blakinn had called him this sometimes: *little one*.

Pryce winced, his brows furrowed as the Fylkir continued to hold him firmly by the face. The man behind him wrested the sword free from Pryce's hip, and grew very still and quiet. The Fylkir glanced beyond Pryce's shoulder toward him, his brow cocked. "Hvat er that?" he asked. *What is it?*

"Einar Eirikson," said the man behind him softly, his voice tremulous, as though he struggled to repress some deep and exuberant delight. "Hinn er Einar Eirikson."

"Gangar mik that," said the Fylkir. He shoved Pryce aside, sending him stumbling into the grasp of the nearest Hildofar warrior, who spun Pryce smartly about and held him firmly by the shoulders.

The Fylkir snatched the sword away from his fellow and peered at it closely, studying both the engraved hilt and the inscription in the scabbard. "This sword belongs to Einar Eirikson, kin to His Mighty, Fjornir Itreker, Konung of Engjold and heir to his lands and keeps," he read aloud, drawing all of his men, along with the Torachan soldiers standing nearby to silence.

The Fylkir looked at Pryce, the corner of his mouth unfurling beneath his mustache. "Vidar be praised." He walked slowly toward Pryce; the closer he drew, the more his smile widened. "It is you."

Pryce lifted his chin defiantly and held the man's gaze as he approached. He shrugged his shoulders against his captor's tight grip and narrowed his brows at the

Fylkir. He heard one of the Torachans say in hissing directive to another: “Go find Praetorius Paulus—get him now.”

“You are Einar Eirikson?” the Fylkir asked Pryce.

“I am, yes,” Pryce replied, not averting his gaze.

“I met your father once, many long years ago,” the Fylkir told him. He raised a speculative brow. “You look nothing like him.”

“I am told that a lot,” Pryce said. “I am Einar, Fjolnir’s heir. Let these others go free. I am the one you want.”

The Fylkir arched his brow all the more, snorting with disdainful amusement.

“Let them go,” Pryce said again.

“And if I will not?” the Fylkir asked him. His hand shot out, his fingers crushing against Pryce’s jaw again. He leaned toward Pryce, until their noses brushed together. “Do you know who I am, you insolent whelp?” he snapped. “Do you?”

“I know you are a traitor,” Pryce said, gasping as the man’s hand tightened against his face. “You are a traitor to Engjold. You let the empire murder your own people—butcher them for a crown!”

“What do you know of the crown?” the Fylkir hissed through clenched teeth, a fine spray of spittle peppering against Pryce’s face. “My name is Bersi Kappi, Fylkir and Hersirson of the Hildofar kyn in Mikillfit. That crown belongs to my people by right! My people—not yours! My brother Arinbjorn married that fat bitch Ithunn, Fjolnir’s first-born and eldest daughter to reclaim the throne of Vornirtindr for the Nordri, and you would take it from him?” Bersi crushed his fingers against Pryce’s jaw. “You? You are more pup than man—a whelp only weaned from its mother’s teat.”

He wrenched Pryce away from his captor and threw him, sending him staggering, falling to his knees. Bersi stomped toward him, closing his fist in Pryce's hair, forcing his head back at a painful angle. Pryce arched his back against the strain, gasping sharply.

"For every indignity my people have been forced to bear since Fjolnir named you heir, I will see you answer in turn—and in full—cub," Bersi seethed. He looked up at one of his men. "Bring me that cart!" he shouted. "Roll it over here—bring it, I say!"

He jerked Pryce to his feet by his hair, and Pryce staggered, dancing on his tiptoes, his scalp searing with agony. Two of the Hildofar shoved a two-wheeled cart toward them, the sort one pushed by hand to haul small loads, like firewood.

"Turn it over!" Bersi demanded. "Turn the damn thing over!"

"You are a traitor," Pryce said, his brows furrowed defiantly as he strained to look over his shoulder at Bersi. "A traitor and a murderer. The only indignities your kyns have suffered have been those you have brought upon yourselves."

"I will show you indignity, A'Mithal pup," Bersi hissed, shoving Pryce facedown onto the overturned cart. He shifted his grip, moving his hand to the scruff of Pryce's neck, pinning him firmly against the wagon. "Someone get me some rope. Tie his rot hands to the wheels—bind him fast!"

Pryce winced, trying to struggle as two burly Hildofar seized him roughly by the wrists, forcing his arms out across the axle of the wagon.

They meant to beat him, he realized; undoubtedly, they planned to lay his back open with a lash strap. Pryce had never been beaten before. His parents had never struck him, and Aedhir had never raised his voice, much less his hand against Pryce. He had not even ever thrown a punch in a pub brawl, although Aedhir had taught him

how to fend for himself in a scrap. *You are an officer and a gentleman of the Crown*, Aedhir had told him. *Officers do not brawl*. It was good advice that unfortunately Aedhir himself had seldom taken to heart.

Hoah, Mother Above, Pryce thought in bright alarm. *I think I am in trouble here*.

The Hildofar had gathered around, abandoning the groups of other prisoners to cluster about the wagon, attracted by the loud and heated exchange of words between Pryce and their Fylkir. They laughed at Pryce, shouting and jeering at him in Enghan, spitting at him. Even the Torachan soldiers drew more closely about the wagon, clapping their hands together as Pryce's arms were bound, calling out and hooting in enthusiastic encouragement to the Hildofar.

"Truss him up!" one of them shouted out, laughing loudly.

"Tighter than that, lads!" cried another. "Come on now—draw those lines taut!"

They lashed Pryce's arms to the wheel hubs, drawing the ropes painfully around his wrists, leaving him immobilized and helpless, his stomach shoved against the edge of the cart. Pryce twisted his hands desperately, straining in vain against the tethers, and when he heard the sound of Bersi's heavy footfalls behind him, he flinched. The Fylkir grasped him by the hair again, jerking his head back, forcing a cry from him.

"Hoah, I am going to enjoy this, pup," Bersi hissed, bringing his lips against Pryce's ear, his breath hot and damp.

"Let him go," Einar said from behind them, shouldering his way to the front of his group of captives. Pryce turned to him and met his gaze, wide-eyed and stricken.

"N-no...!" he said, shaking his head.

“Let him go,” Einar said again, baring his fists. In that moment, even without him saying another word, Pryce could not understand how they did not know, how they could not realize. Einar did not look like a boy anymore; he had summoned within himself the stern poise and commanding presence of a man—and more than this, of a king.

One of the Hildofar stepped toward Einar, shoving him roughly. “Get back, whelp, unless you would like a turn, too,” he sneered. Einar stumbled, but regained his footing, and when his dark eyes locked with the Hildofar’s, when his brows drew together and he stepped forward once more, the man shied back. Two of his fellows came to his aid, slapping their palms against Einar’s shoulders and forcing him back again.

“You rot pup,” Bersi said to Pryce. “I will see you answer for all of Fjolnir’s offenses in turn.”

The Hildofar and Torachan soldiers howled at this, raising their fists and faces skyward and baying like a pack of crazed wolves.

“Hoah—give him a turn alright, Bersi!” shouted one of the Torachans, eliciting another rousing cheer from the crowd.

“Give the pup a coronation he will not soon forget!” cried another.

Pryce realized what they meant, what Bersi meant to do, and his eyes flew wide. He felt Bersi jerk the hem of his kyrtil up toward his hips, shoving the thick, furlined folds of hide out of his way. “No!” Pryce said, struggling against him. “No, you bastard—!”

“I have fifty-seven men among these maniples, whelp,” Bersi said to him, tightening his grip against Pryce’s neck, shoving him against the wagon and holding him

fast, despite his struggles. Pryce felt Bersi's broad thigh plant squarely between his legs to keep him still, and then he felt Bersi's fingers hook beneath the waist of his pants, jerking roughly against them. "And for my brother—for Airnbjorn's honor—I promise you every one of us shall have a turn in making you answer."

"No!" Pryce cried, thrashing his arms futilely, shearing his wrists open and bloody against his ropes. "Get away from me, you bastard rot...!"

The more he fought, the more delighted the Torachans and Hildofar became, and the more wildly and eagerly they screamed and cheered.

"Hoah—you heard the man! Get in line, lads!" one of the soldiers cried out, to roars of approving laughter.

"Four months spent in the field—here is better than a pristine Cneasan whore!" yelled another, stepping forward and pretending to loosen his belt while his fellows yowled and clapped him on the shoulders.

"Let us see the little bastard walk upright again after tonight!" someone cried.

"He shall not, I promise you," Bersi hissed, his ego and mettle stoked by the rousing cries of his fellows. He yanked at Pryce's pants, tearing the seams along the waist.

"No!" Pryce shouted, struggling against his ropes. "No, you bloody rot damn—!"

"Leysar hann!" Einar roared, lunging forward. *Release him!* "Take your hands off him!" The Hildofar grabbed him, and he fought with them wildly. "You honorless bastards!" he shouted. "Let him go!"

"What is going on here?"

At this, a loud and commanding voice booming over the din, the whooping group of soldiers abruptly fell silent. Torachans and Hildofar alike shrank back, drawing away from the wagon, their eyes darting toward the ground. Pryce felt Bersi's fingers slacken against his neck and fall away.

"Lord Paulus!" Pryce heard someone hiss breathlessly.

"Bloody rot—it is the Praetorius and the centurions!" gasped another, sounding stricken.

A Torachan man walked toward them, flanked by a tight cluster of four imperial centurions. He was dressed in a resplendent uniform adorned with elaborately embossed silver armor plates. He wore a tall helmet capped with a long tail of scarlet-dyed horsehair. He was clean-shaven and handsome, perhaps Aedhir's age, if not slightly older. He was broad-shouldered and long-legged. He carried a magnificent sword with an ornately detailed two-handed hilt, and as he strode toward Pryce, he kept the palm of his black leather glove draped across the imposing blade's pommel.

"What is going on here?" he demanded again, his tone sharp and admonishing, as though he scolded an unruly hound. "I gave implicit orders that I was to be summoned at once when Fjolinir's heir was found."

Bersi blinked at him as he approached, his eyes wide. "Praetorius Paulus, I..." he said. "I was only...I meant only to..."

"I know what you meant to do, you savage rot," the man, Paulus said, his brows narrowing. He strode past Pryce without sparing him another glance, keeping his gaze fixed upon the Enghan man. "You meant to defile that boy. You meant to mete forth

some measure of your misperceived dishonor upon him in brutal and boorish assault. You meant to let your rot band of barbaric fellows each have their part in this offense.

He turned to the four centurions with him, nodding his chin sharply at Pryce. “Cut him loose,” he said. The men moved at his direction, two of them drawing knives from their hips and setting to work, sawing at the ropes fettering Pryce’s hands to the wagon wheels.

“Praetorius Paulus, I...” Bersi stammered, drawing Paulus’ gaze. Paulus turned to the Enghan, jerking his sword from his scabbard. With no further warning, Paulus stepped against Bersi, driving the blade squarely into the Enghan’s stomach. Bersi uttered a gargled cry, and he convulsed against the Praetorius, his large hands slapping against Paulus’ shoulders as his knees buckled. He crumpled against the shaft of the sword, and as Paulus wrenched it loose from his gut, he collapsed to the ground.

“This boy is imperial property,” Paulus said loudly, turning his face and addressing all of the men gathered around him. He thrust the blood-smearred length of his blade toward Pryce. “All of these prisoners belong to the empire—not to the Nordri tribes of Engjold. Offense against them is as offense against Torach. I will have you all mark that—and well—lest you wind up in the dirt with your liver and lights against your palms.”

He glowered at the soldiers who had been cheering Bersi along, howling and applauding his brutal efforts. Paulus let his gaze linger upon each in turn, until they dropped their eyes toward the toes of their boots, abashed. “You and you...you four...the five of you.” He pointed among the soldiers and then glanced at the nearby imperial scribe. “Mark their names, all of them. Those four there, as well—and those.”

He pointed again and then turned to the soldiers once more. “Gather your gear and strap it to your spines. Tender your steeds to the Calo at once—the lot of you. You will all be walking from here to Kharhorin.” His brows narrowed in disapproval. “I will also see each of you docked a day in full from your wages. How dare you stand by idle, impotent—and against my rot damn orders—while this boy is brutalized? You are imperial legionnaires—men of civility and bloody damn reason, not these barbaric wildmen of Engjold and this is no rotted cabaret in Serdica for your amusement. When I give an order, you will bloody well see it through.”

He walked away, motioning with his fingertips toward Einar and the other young men from Lith. “See that your men load them into wagons,” he said to the four centurions. “Get them ready to leave. Have their hands and feet bound, and bring Fjolnir’s boy-heir to me. I can see I shall need keep near the bloody little bastard until we reach Kharhorin.” He spared a contemptuous glower over his shoulder at Pryce. “See that he bathes first. Get that fetid, Enghan-rot stench off of him. I find it most offensive.”

Chapter Twelve

“That bitch,” Aulus Tertius hissed.

He sat behind a massive desk in Yisun’s suite of chambers. He had moved into the suite within a week of the Qatun’Eke departing the royal city, ordering all of his belongings, clothing and books moved to this, his new and self-declared appointment at the palace. He had likewise ordered all of Yisun’s personal effects inventoried and removed from the suite. She would not have future need for the mountains of silk and furlined clothes, shoes, hair accessories and cosmetics. If the damn rot bitch ever ventured within one hundred miles of Kharhorin again, Aulus fully meant to see her run through on the spot.

It had not been her departure that had incensed him so much—it was everything that had come to light in grim and infuriating detail in the three weeks since. Three days after Yisun had left, two cohorts of imperial bellatori infantrymen had arrived at the city. Aulus had been caught off-guard, totally bewildered by their unexpected appearance. His confusion must have been apparent on his face when he met in the palace with the two cohorts’ tribune of centurion commanders and the optio, or first officers.

“My Lord Consul, we received orders of specific dispatch from the city of Badapur in Galjin,” the tribune’s senior centurion, Appius Septimus had told him. “We were to report within the month to you, my lord—the acting tribunicia potestate in Kharhorin.”

“To me?” Aulus had asked, confounded.

“Yes, my Lord Consul,” Appius had replied, looking for all of the world as befuddled as Aulus felt. “Our orders are to supplement your bellatori here, my lord, to fortify the city.”

“Fortify the city?” Aulus had asked, feeling as though he had just taken a swift punch to the groin. “Against what?”

“The Enghan, Lord Consul,” Appius had said. He had raised his brow and cocked his head at a slight angle. “Has Cneas not informed you of such matters, my lord?”

“That bloody rot bitch,” Aulus muttered, sitting at his desk, surrounded by an enormous clutter of papers and parchments—hundred upon hundreds of correspondences stacked and arranged in haphazard order.

He had suspected that Yisun had somehow been intercepting correspondences couriered to him from both Cneas and the Torachan Praetorius, Decimus Paulus in Engjold. He had believed Yisun was reading these correspondences, keeping abreast of pertinent activity and policy affecting Ulus. He had received word from Decimus and the imperial Senate sporadically at best, but had dismissed these irregularities. He had thought a combination of the distance from Cneas, the imposing conditions of the Ulusian winter and the simple fact that not much of imperial interest or consequence occurred within his region accounted for the lapses in correspondence. It had not occurred to him that Yisun might have been deliberately keeping some of these letters from him until that fateful meeting with the centurions from Galjin.

When three more cohorts had arrived in Kharhorin within four days of Centurion Septimus’ troops, their tribunes bearing similar orders of both dispatch and duty from Ulus’ neighboring states of Ebesun, Bagahan and Ordos, Aulus had at last realized that

something very large—and very important to the empire—was brewing in Ulus, and it was something Yisun had kept from him.

“Let her drag her rot ass back here from the west,” he said with a scowl as he skimmed through a packet of orders and instructions that were to have been given to him upon his arrival in Kharhorin, but which he had never received. “I will drive my blade through Yisun’s bloody damn gut myself.”

He had taken six guards with him and stormed her suite, forcibly tossing her chattering, fussing bevy of servants who had remained at the palace out into the corridor on their scrawny asses. Aulus and the soldiers had torn the rooms apart, discovering crates of correspondences—veritable years’ worth of documents and letters—that Yisun had hoarded. Aulus had realized perhaps his predecessor, Tiberius Crassus had not been so incompetent after all; judging by the more than three hundred letters from Cneas addressed to his attention that had apparently never found their way there, Crassus seemed to have simply been a victim of circumstance, purposely kept out of exchanges of information by the manipulative and deceitful wiles of the Qatun’Eke.

Aulus had trembled with rage when he had discovered bundles of additional correspondences—these addressed to him, including the large packet of documents bearing the official seal of the imperial Senate that Aulus now held in his hands. No matter how many times he read through the pages, the result was the same—he would shudder with fury, his brows drawing together so tightly, he could feel the strain along the crimped bridge of his nose.

That bitch, he thought. That treacherous, rotted bawd. Hoah, she played me well with her feigned manners and social graces—her tales of dragons, damnable drugs, her pack of whores. She would have seen me out of my mind, dazed and incapacitated while all of this unfurled about me. She would have left me to ruin—she would have seen to it gladly.

The packet contained sensitive, classified information that Yisun never should have been privy to. When he had found the pages in her bedchamber, tucked with countless others in a wooden crate stowed beneath her bed, Aulus had at last learned the true reasons for the empire's interest in Engjold, and why the territory of Ulus was so important to them. At last, he had come to understand why nearly a full and standard legion of troops had been sent to the Taiga, and at last, he had realized just how much Yisun had undermined him in the timeframe of less than three months.

Black powder, one of the documents in the packet said. An Abhacan devising worth more than gold to the empire, a composite capable of manning weapons of warfare vastly superior to any currently employed by our imperial legions.

Little more than two months earlier, just after Aulus' arrival in Kharhorin, Decimus Paulus had sent word to him of new developments in Engjold—events that Decimus felt could at last see the empire successful in their efforts to claim the secrets of black powder. Aulus found this note now, atop a stack of others on the right side of his desk. He lifted it in hand and read through it for at least the thousandth time.

We have found unexpected allies, Decimus had written. The Nordri clans of Engjold, the collective tribes of H'rossjord and Mikillfit north of the Nordr mountains have come to us in good faith, offering a most tempting barter. The Nordri want the crown of

Engjold. If we get it for them, they will share with us freely their black powder production capabilities.

Decimus wrote that the king of Engjold, an ignorant rot named Fjolnir Itreker had named an heir to his throne at a meeting in which he had declared war against Torach. Fjolnir had no sons, and the Nordri tribes' noble sons had married the king's daughters in the hopes of inheriting the crown. In a maneuver that Aulus had to admit was pretty underhanded and admirable, Fjolnir had trounced the Nordri's hopes by naming a distant nephew his heir—a boy, no less, a lad of seventeen named Einar Eirikson.

The boy will be the key to our victory, and the Enghan's defeat, Decimus had promised in his letter. He is dear to Fjolnir Itreker and the king will take no risk that would see harm befall the boy by that benefit alone. Fjolnir Itreker will bend like a willow against a sharp wind—with no thought to his royal bloodline or throne—if he thinks it shall spare the boy.

Decimus had followed this correspondence with another that was dated only about three weeks earlier. This one had been received in Kharhorin a week ago, and had actually made it to Aulus' hand—the hand for which it was intended—without Yisun there to intercept it.

Our efforts have been rewarded, Lord Consul, Decimus wrote. Thirty-seven prisoners claimed—including the boy-heir, Einar Eirikson. We are returning with eager haste for Kharhorin, where I will tender the boy to your custody. The others should make for unique and splendid fare at the Cneasan catastas.

According to the correspondence, Decimus and his troops—with the Enghan heir in tow—were due in Ulu, in Kharhorin any day now.

And here I would have been to greet them, sprawled and trussed to a bed, dazed into obliviousness on serekum with a Khahl whore straddling my hips, Aulus thought, frowning, closing his hand into a fist. *At least, if Yisun Goyaljin had her way.*

“Rot damn bitch,” he whispered.

His steward Faustus appeared in the doorway of the chamber, brushing his knuckles lightly, courteously against the frame to draw Aulus’ gaze from his thoughts. “You summoned me, Lord Tertius?”

“Yes, Faustus,” Aulus said, lowering the correspondences he held in his hand. He lit a toitin, tilting his head back and exhaling a thick plume of smoke toward the ceiling. “I have a errand for you.”

He dipped his hand into the pocket of his justicoat, pulling out a small velveteen bag of coins. He tossed it to his steward, who caught it between his palms and blinked curiously.

“I am a brilliant man, Faustus,” Aulus told him. He glanced at Faustus, his brow arched. “And do you know why?”

“I have not the slightest inkling, my lord,” Faustus replied.

“You should not risk the wrath of a former exactor to the imperial Dioecetes,” Aulus said.

“I shall bear that in mind, my lord,” Faustus assured him.

“It is really most delicious, Faustus,” Aulus said, kicking his feet down from the desk. He rested his elbows against the edge and smiled at Faustus. “I do not know why it occurred to me sooner. Of course, it was likely because that rot bitch Yisun had me swooning with her drugs, exhausted by the relentless assault of her whores.”

“Yes, my lord, I cannot tell you how it grieved me to watch them force themselves upon you so ruthlessly,” Faustus said. “So many times, as you protested their offerings of serekeum and lovemaking, I felt my heart ache for your suffering, my lord.”

Aulus glanced at him. He had gotten rid of the concubines, and knew that Faustus, who had grown rather friendly with the lot of rotted bawds, was still sore at him for this. Aulus had sold them all to flesh traders to be brought to Cneasan catastas. In fact, Aulus had sold each and every member of Yisun’s household staff and remaining Minghan guards. He had used part of the monies he had earned from their sales to purchase new slaves—imperial slaves, with Torachan features and pale Torachan complexions.

“As tribunicia potestate, I have the authority to seize all of Yisun Goyaljin’s properties and assets,” he said. He was not going to let Faustus’ petulance diffuse the victory he had achieved.

“Which you did straight away, yes, my lord,” Faustus said, nodding.

“Of course, to any other consul, such deliverance would end up in the name of the empire,” Aulus said. “An earnest transferral—like those of the parliamentary members—that would likely earn no more than a doting pat on the head by the Senate and Pater Patriae. Certainly not a share in the new-found and significant earnings.”

Faustus raised his brow.

Aulus smiled broadly. “Therein, Faustus, lies the advantages of having been a dutiful exactor for so long,” he said, tapping his fingertip against his brow. “I had all of the Khahl funds transferred into a secured *deposita ad signa* at the treasury—an

account, Faustus, which is in the empire's name, but opened and held during a time of official war."

He drew in on his toitin again. "In a way, these circumstances have been as a favor to me," he said. "By law—*ius fetiale*—occurrence of hostile relations outside of the empire grants imperial consuls unique privilege. By my authority—and with no approval from the Dioecetes or Senate—I can dictate and move imperial funds as I see fit in circumstances of war."

He looked at Faustus, pleased with himself, and frowned to note the confusion on Faustus' face. "The money is mine, you stupid bastard," he said, throwing his hands in the air in exasperation. "Yisun's money—all of her properties and titles—it is mine. I do not even have to tell the bloody empire of its existence."

"Then why sign it all to the empire's name, my lord?" Faustus asked. "Why not simply have them tender it to yours?"

Aulus' frown deepened. "Because, you rot-wit, if it is in the empire's name, even if they learn of it, they cannot question my distribution of it. Not during wartime—I do not even have to mark bloody ledgers to account for its comings and goings. If it was in my name, and the empire learned of it, they could nail me to the wall—if only for taxes owed on it all."

"Begging your pardon, my lord," Faustus said. He raised his brow at Aulus. "But does this not make you guilty of a sort of treason? Withholding information from the empire?"

"It might, yes," Aulus said with a smirk. "Were it not perfectly legal." He dropped the toitin onto the floor and pivoted in his chair, snuffing out the smoldering scrap with

the toe of his shoe. “These are imperial laws, not mine, Faustus,” he said. “I am merely applying them to my own benefit.”

Faustus looked at him dubiously.

“I am a brilliant man,” Aulus said again, paying him no attention.

“You would certainly seem to have some wits in your skull, yes, my lord,” Faustus said.

Aulus smiled again. “Never cross an exactor,” he told Faustus. “Anger a soldier, and you find a sword through your gullet. Anger a man of the imperial treasury, and he can break more than you—he can destroy the hopes and prosperities of countless generations of your descendents.”

Aulus stood and walked toward the mirror. He paused before the glass, admiring his reflection, from his powdered wig that gathered in a dapper, bow-adorned tail against the nape of his neck to his immaculate, starched stockings and polished, heeled shoes. He tugged the lapels of his justicoat into proper place along his chest, lifted his chin and tapped against the meticulous folds of his cravat, making sure it was arranged suitably about his throat, tucked into place beneath the top of his embroidered silk waistcoat. He dusted his palm against the knee-length tails of his coat and gave each of his broad sleeve cuffs an adjusting pull to settle everything as was fashionable and flattering. “What is a man without his money, Faustus?” he asked. “Nothing.”

“Funny,” Faustus remarked. “I thought that was honor, my lord.”

Aulus snorted, turning to him. “Honor, like anything else in the bloody wide Bith, my dear Faustus, is bought, bartered and sold,” he said. “It is naught but an antiquated term used by people such as yourself—slaves or plebeian refuse—to offer some

semblance of hope and dignity that their purses cannot provide.” He opened a desk drawer and produced another pouch of coins, twice again as large as the one he had tossed to Faustus. Aulus held it over the desk and opened his hand, letting it fall, listening as the coins inside jangled melodically together. “Here is all of the honor a man needs in the end,” he said. “This and nothing more.”

A letter on top of one of the nearest stacks of correspondences drew his gaze, and he lifted it in hand. It was the letter from Decimus that Aulus had received a week ago. He had returned it to the pile with the last page of the correspondence atop the first two, and the last paragraph the Praetorius had written caught his attention, as it had nearly from the first time Aulus had read it. He glanced at Faustus and then took the money pouch in hand, tossing this one to the steward, as well.

“My lord?” Faustus asked, catching it deftly.

“Go forth and hire me a dress maker,” Aulus told him, looking down at the parchment.

Something else of interest and possible bearing has come to light for our efforts against the Enghan, Decimus had written.

“A dress maker, my lord?” Faustus asked.

“Yes,” Aulus murmured, nodding, without averting his gaze. “Have them brought to the palace at once, with the finest assortments of their wares and fabrics. Tell them no expense shall be spared.”

The boy, Einar Eirikson shall prove a boon to the empire, Decimus wrote. *But another revelation has come to pass besides, one that might prove of equal benefit to us—and surely sweeter company.*

“A wigmaker, too,” Aulus said, glancing at Faustus. “Tell them to bring cosmetics and what-not...” He flapped his hand toward his face. “Perfumes, underpinnings, panniers, stockings. Whatever is the height of fashion for imperial noblewomen.”

Aulus turned his eyes toward the letter again, smiling as he had the first time he had read Decimus' words. *We found a young woman among the Enghan, he said. A beautiful flower of apparent Median descent. She claims to be from the city of Belgaeran, the royal capital of Tiralainn, noble daughter to a Captain in the realm's Crown Navy, and new bride to a Naval Lieutenant under her father's command. They were captured by the Enghan, held against their will by the savages, and though there is no sign we have found of her father's survival, or her husband's, she is grateful nonetheless for her rescue from such dire circumstances. Her name is Lady Aelwen Fainne-Finamur, and I will deliver her to your charge upon my arrival in Kharhorin. I assure you, my Lord Consul, she shall receive naught but courteous and genteel treatment in the meanwhile.*

“You are expecting visitors, my lord?” Faustus asked.

“Yes, Faustus,” Aulus said quietly, glancing toward his steward, his smile widening. “As a matter of fact, I am.”

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The shriek startled all of the Oirat from slumber. Toghrul sat up, scrambling to get his knees beneath him as his hand darted clumsily, groggily for the hilt of his scimitar. He jerked the blade loose of its sheath, stumbling to his feet. “Tengri ibegel bide!” he cried. *Tengri help us!*

“What was that?” one of his Kelet, Jelmei cried hoarsely, staggering upright, drawing his scimitar.

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

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

“Where is bugu Yeb?” Jelmei cried, his voice overlapping Juchin’s and Aigiarn’s.

“Where is Temu?” Toghrul said, realizing the boy was gone. He met Aigiarn’s gaze, stricken. *“Where is Temu?”*

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

Aigiarn spun toward her. "What? Why? What are they doing?"

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

"Rhyden!" Aigiarn shrieked, and she ran into the trees.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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