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AMMEY MCKEAF

by

JANE SHOUP

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DEDICATION

To Allyson, Hayley and Mackenzie—my little women. There may be a time that I don't dedicate a book to you—but this isn't it.

PROLOGUE

IN THE MIDDLE of the Cantabric Sea, surrounded by the Kingdom of England, the Kingdom of France and the five kingdoms that make up the Iberian Peninsula, was the island country of Azulland. It is no more, or so they say. Yet, every ship that attempts sailing past that phantom land area, the very space the country once occupied, is lost, never to be seen again. 'Cursed' is the whispered reply. Perhaps. I once thought so.

The mystery of Azulland has been a thing of great speculation, and, yes, utter fabrication. Eventually, by the passage of time and alterations, it may be forgotten altogether, just as we've forgotten Ydlil, Khlohar, Atlantis and so many others. Perhaps it matters not—yet there are legendary stories from this country that are worth knowing. I know because it was my home—and will be again should I manage to secure passage back.

The regret I feel for fleeing her shores is more profound than any words could express. Like many others who fled, I was fearful for my life. I would explain that, indeed, I fully intend on it, but I dare not blurt out the most compelling factors for the reaction it invariably causes in the listener, or, in this case, reader. It takes time to explain how things came to be the way they are—or rather, were, when I fled.

If this strikes you as odd to read, imagine how it feels to be the writer, to have experienced such a profound loss. In these last years, I have developed a fascination with the

craft, indeed art, of cartography. Often I look on a favorite old map, fixated on the island of Azulland, and I can clearly picture the Blue Mountains we were known for. I can still see the great cities of Nawllah and Bellux-Abry, the grand castles of the southern valley, the cold, clean rivers and fields of wild loira—a deep blue flower so sweet in scent, nothing can compare. It does not grow anywhere else and so it will fade in the memory of those who will vanish from the earth. Perhaps it matters not, but I state this vow with utter certainty, if I am ever able to cross back to my homeland, I shall never leave those shores again, no matter what forces rip and tear at her.

Whatever history may ultimately conclude, we were not a wicked people. We were mostly a peaceful nation. Mostly, I say, because there are men with greed and ambition running through their veins where blood should be. All nations have these men to contend with or bow down to. The greatest 'crime' we are accused of is heresy, and for that, we are condemned after the fact. The church has pronounced that Azulland was destroyed by God as punishment for paganism. As to that fallacy I will state the following. It is true that we were not ruled by the church, as so many other nations are, or declare themselves to be. I contend we were a more civilized people for relying on our own law and wisdom, rather than the dictates of the holy church. I further contend that the church makes this declaration to control the masses by fear. From the depths of my soul, I feel Azulland is still there, as beautiful as ever, merely cloaked from the mortal eyes of the outside world.

So, who will be interested in these forbidden chronicles of Azulland, when the church has banned them? That cannot be my concern. Water seeks its own level, and truth finds its place in the hearts of those courageous enough to hear it. Besides which, there is higher power than that of the church, and I cling to it. Although I am but a tiny thread clinging to that great fabric, I am a thread, and I am clinging.

The fact of the matter is; I have wanted to begin this narrative for years, but could not. The delay was not for want of inspiration, nor for a lack of ponderous thought but, rather, it was the result of a surplus of vanity. Only when I truly surrendered this vanity, when I began praying to the almighty force and to all the gods and goddesses under that force for transport home, but even more so, to convey the truth about my homeland, did I achieve the necessary gifts to proceed. I have been transported back through visions, back in both terms of time and distance. I have been privy to remarkable scenes gone by.

Given this revelation, I know I shall be called mad. Furthermore, it is no secret that I have been labeled a dangerous heretic. Perhaps I will burn before I can find passage to the latitude and longitude I mutter to myself with some constancy, as if the mere wish of it were enough to transport me back. If not, I will relay all that I know, all that I've been shown, for I know it to be the truth.

I will be invisible and omnipotent in the telling, as it should be. I will not sign my name to this or provide information on my person, because it is of no importance. Perhaps this has been the greatest lesson of my life. This writer is merely the

messenger. It is the message, the chronicles of Azulland, which bears significance. And so I put forth this effort to explain my people and my country, and the events that led to its vanishing.

If this offends you, you will naturally slam the book shut, perhaps even burn it. If not, and with no further ado, we begin. I write 'we,' dear reader, because you are now a part of the journey. By the magic of words and your own imagination, I grant you a bird's eye view as we approach Azulland from its northern end.

The sea, you will notice, is a deep blue, then azure, then green as we reach the shore of Bellux-Abry, the northernmost city. It boasts the grandest palace in all the land, constructed in 1214. You can see clearly see the elaborate, gold-tipped turrets and, if we dip down, the wide moats filled with shimmering redfish.

As we travel southward, you will see many villages, small and large. You will see rich farmland and rivers, lakes and creeks. You will see fields of red poppies, cultivated for their yield of opium, and fields of wild blue loira, indigenous to the island. Pay attention, the Blue Mountains are close, and we will have to gain altitude to clear the snowy peaks.

If you dare, venture east and you will see Oisenbant, home of the

Leviathans. They are a giant people, averaging eight and a half feet tall. Their faces looked somewhat deformed to our eyes and they are commonly perceived be stupid and dangerous, but two things should be noted regarding that perception, or perhaps misconception. They have always held

their own in battle, and they have never initiated the skirmishes that led to war. It seems worth noting. They are not a threat, provided you do not come within their reach. They no longer venture beyond the region of Oisenbant, and no sane person ventures in.

If you do not wish to see Oisenbant, stay straight as we pass over the mountains, and we will come to Nawllah, the city at the heart of Azulland. Its ivory palace is long and flat, built around large courtyards with flowering trees and massive fountains.

Continue southward, and you come to Vihlae forest. Its towering trees are ancient, and a feeling of majesty and mysticism emanates from this place, long purported to be the home of witches and magic. Beyond the forest is Wydenyl, an ancient village settled by druids. Its most remarkable feature is the eight-sided temple built from the great oaks of Vihlae.

Beyond Wydenyl is the southern valley. There are less villages here, more individual estates. We'll pass Stonewater Forge, the estate of the McKeaf's, then turn eastward and continue to Thender, a castle built with the pale-blue stones mined from Vhahas cavern. This is where my preparation ends and the story begins—just after you go around the castle.

You'll no doubt notice the gardens, the winding, mile-long maze, and the men drilling with sword and shield, but pay attention to the windows toward the top of the castle. When you see a lovely young woman with golden hair staring out at the men below, draw closer. This is Ammey McKeaf, for whom book one of the chronicles is named, as we follow much of the

story from her perspective. The A in Ammey is soft, as in Virgil's Amaryllis, for whom the flower was later named. It, too, seems worth noting, as her name should not be mispronounced.

Beyond her, you will see a rich bedchamber in various shades of red and gold. A dark haired young noblewoman sits frowning into a looking glass as her hair is dressed by an older woman, a servant of the house...

CHAPTER 1: The House of McKeaf

"WHY DO MEN WAR?" Julia mused in a bored tone. "That's too tight," she snapped at her lady, practically in the same breath.

"You're in a vile temper," Hizdrah snapped back. "Hold still."

"You are twisting it too tightly," Julia hissed. "My head will ache for days."

Hizdrah gave up and stepped back with a disgusted harrumph. "Call for me when you're prepared to be civil," she said, stalking off.

"Maids are not supposed to be surly," Julia called after her.

The slamming of the door was Hizdrah's only reply.

Julia began undoing the twists.

Ammey looked over from her perch in the window seat.

"Everything you undo, she'll only have to do again."

"Don't nag at me, too!"

"Don't be such a spoiled child." Ammey turned her attention back to the swordplay on the lawn. "You're of noble blood. This is what it is to be noble."

Julia fixed her with a look. "And how would you know?"

"Having watched you for the whole of my existence, I suppose," Ammey replied.

Julia rose from her seat, frustrated that she wasn't capable of needling her friend. "What are you looking at?"

"Your men. They're drilling."

"Of course they're drilling," Julia replied as she walked closer to see. "Everyone's drilling. Corin is coming. The monsters of Bellux-Abry are coming." She said it sarcastically, but it was too frightening a subject to be cavalier about and they knew it. Both young women caught sight of waving gold and purple banners at that moment. A train of carriages was approaching from the south, its banners, mounted on tall poles, announcing them from afar.

"Who is it today?" Ammey asked.

"Petre Lucias of Portugal."

"How did they get carriages here, across the sea?"

"How would I know?"

Ammey heard the tension in her friend's voice. She looked at Julia, then got to her feet and pulled her from the window. "Come choose what you'll wear. Even if you don't care for Petre of Portugal, you want him and his attendants returning home, to their very, *very* far away court, able only to speak of your great beauty and charm."

"Great beauty," Julia repeated drolly. The facts were, her nose was too sharp and her long, dark hair tended to frizz. Her eyes were her only true claim to beauty. Perhaps her hands, as well. She had small, soft, white hands. Not like Ammey's, whose hands were ignored after riding and whatever else she felt like doing. Of course, Ammey possessed a careless beauty she would never know; a perfect nose, wide green eyes and golden hair that waved softly, not curled madly and frizzed whenever it felt the inclination.

"I like this one," Ammey said, selecting a flowing, silk overgown of orangey-red from the wardrobe and holding it in front of her. "The color of a glorious sunset."

"It makes my skin look sallow," Julia said wryly. "And it's inappropriate for an afternoon gathering."

"The midnight blue, then," Ammey suggested.

"Speaking of gatherings," Julia said, "who's gathered at the Forge?"

Ammey hung the garment back in its place. "Dozens of men I've never seen before. It's all very serious and grim."

"Are any of them handsome?"

"Few are noble, I'm sure."

"I did not ask if they were noble. I asked if they were handsome."

"I didn't notice."

"Do you know what I think?" Julia asked, walking away from her wardrobe. "I think the whole concept of nobility is outdated and ridiculous. Why is it that I should have one set of rules established for me, and you should have complete freedom of choice?"

"No one has complete freedom of choice," Ammey retorted. "And hadn't you best get ready?"

Julia folded her arms and set her mouth in a stubborn line.

"You should. And I have to get home," Ammey said.

"Father said not to be long." She went for her cloak and threw it around her shoulders. "Shall I send Hizdrah back?"

"I think I'll go with you," Julia said, mischievously.

Ammey gave her a look. "You can't and you know it."

"For a little ride," Julia wheedled. "I'll feel much better with some fresh air and exertion."

"Your parents will be furious," Ammey warned.

"They've told me I have to choose a husband in the next fortnight, or they shall choose one for me." Julia's dark eyes were shining with suppressed emotion.

Ammey knew this, of course. Julia had harped on the matter for days.

"So what do I care if they're furious?" Julia demanded.

"But what if Petre is handsome and interesting? What if you actually like him? He could be the man of your dreams, full of chivalry and romance."

"I think I'd prefer masculinity."

"He could be waiting right now in the garden for you, contemplating which is the loveliest flower to present you with."

"How special! He presents me with a gift from my own garden. Besides, the *inquisition* begins in the formal drawing room with official introductions. He's not in the garden. It could never be as simple as that."

Ammey sighed with exasperation. She was trying to help, but nothing she said was a consolation.

"Do you remember when we came up with the plan to marry each other's brother?" Julia asked, smiling.

Ammey laughed. "Of course."

"I so wanted to marry Anthony," Julia said wistfully.

"And then Richard, and then Tom, and then David—" Julia laughed. "I never wanted to marry Nicolas."

"I believe he was six when we first hatched our plan."

"Come on. Let's go," Julia urged. She grabbed her cloak and headed for the door.

"They'll blame me," Ammey complained.

"Because you are such a bad influence," Julia teasingly agreed. Suddenly, she was cheerful. "Of course, you can't help it. It's the result of not having a mother. And the General, who dotes on you and spoils you."

"Spoils me!"

Julia opened the door a crack and peeked out. "And six brothers, who have coarsened you," she said quietly.

Ammey blinked, surprised and slightly hurt by the description. "Am I coarse?"

Julia looked back at her and grinned. "As coarse as you are a bad influence. Now, come on." She grabbed Ammey's hand and led the way—the long, back way, through the east wing and down through the servant's quarters. "We cannot be too careful," Julia communicated in a clandestine whisper.

"Certainly not," Ammey agreed, playing along. "If they catch us, they may string us up."

"And strip us naked," Julia added. "Then parade every man of noble line before us to take a good, long look."

They slipped outside, fighting back laughter, and pulled the hood of their cloaks forward to conceal their faces. They managed to dash to the stable unnoticed, a feat that thrilled them both. Ammey led her mount to the door, and waited anxiously for Julia to ready her horse. "Hurry!"

They rode out moments later at full speed, no longer restraining a burst of joyful laughter. They rode around the

back of the castle, into the clearing and headed for Stonewater Forge.

"I've never felt so free," Julia yelled.

"Odd," Ammey called back. "I've never felt so guilty."

"The price of being a bad influence," Julia replied, laughing.

They didn't slow or speak again until they were nearly to the crossing in the river. "If your parents did choose a husband for you," Ammey asked, "—whom would they choose? Do you know?"

"No," Julia replied, making a face.

"You didn't ask?"

"I was furious. No, I didn't ask."

Ammey studied the fast-moving surface of the water, looking for a shallow area to cross, but looked up at the sound of a fast-approaching rider. Saren was coming at them on his enormous, gray stallion. "Your brother," she announced.

Julia turned and looked with a dark scowl on her face.

"Ladies," Saren shouted, as he neared them. "Your escape was noted and must therefore end here and now, although I must commend you on your riding. Excellent, as usual."

Ammey looked at Julia with an apologetic expression. "Sorry," she mouthed.

"I just want to keep going," Julia said wistfully. "Keep riding. Forever." It wasn't whining, this time; it was a sadly spoken fact.

"It may not be so bad," Ammey offered consolingly.

Saren caught up to them, his dark eyes dancing with merriment. "Back you go," he said to Julia. "They are waiting for you."

Julia glared at her brother. "You just had to ride out and catch me."

Two other horsemen approached, guards from the castle.

"Yes, I did," Saren replied pleasantly. "The Queen ordered it." He motioned over his shoulder. "Your escort, my lady."

"I see them," she snapped angrily. She let out a disgusted sigh and kicked her horse in motion. "I'll get back at you for this," she threatened her brother.

"I rather look forward to it."

Brother and friend watched the escort close in on Julia and lead her back toward the castle, and Ammey felt a pressing sadness on behalf of her friend.

Saren noted her expression. "You know she enjoys making life more dramatic than it need be."

She frowned at him. "Why aren't you off courting someone? You're older than she is."

"The King and Queen have given me the year to choose an appropriate bride, or it is to be Elizabeth Eigmore of Braith."

"I see." Ammey felt a flush of heat, despite the cool wind in her face. She'd spent her childhood in love, or, at least, in infatuation with Saren. Her ardor was fading now, just as his seemed to be blooming.

"I'll escort you back home," he offered.

"Since when do I need an escort?" she challenged.

"Since it's possible the valley is under siege." He edged his horse forward and struck out over the water. "Since now."

She followed and they rode side by side in silence.

"Do you really think it's possible?" she asked minutes later, breaking the silence.

"Being under siege?"

"Yes."

"I don't know," he admitted. "I might know if I was at the Forge rather than having been trapped here, having to meet yet another suitor of my sister's. And someone from Portugal. It's ridiculous. Can we not find a suitable match from our own country?"

"I agree," she said. "I would prefer to keep her close."

"Ah, that's insinuating that you will stay close."

"I only live at Stonewater Forge," she replied breezily.

"But you're of marriageable age now, Amaryllis. You may be moving to some far off place before long."

"I think not. And don't call me Amaryllis."

"Why not?"

"Because it is not my name."

"I don't know why you mind it so. Ammey is an adorable name, well fitting of someone with your innocent face and golden curls, but Amaryllis—"

"Call me what I choose to be called, or don't speak to me at all."

"What if I speak about you?" he teased.

"Everyone knows me as Ammey. What sense would it make to call me by another name?"

"By your proper name?"

"It's not my proper name," she insisted.

"So, are there no suitors pressing their intentions upon you yet?"

She felt her face heat again. She disliked the subject. She especially disliked discussing it with Saren. Soon, he'd be hinting at marrying her again, which was foolish. His parents, the King and Queen, as he was so fond of calling them, would never permit it. Of course, even if he did ask, she wasn't at all certain she would accept. Saren was as handsome as ever. His swarthy complexion, his dark hair and eyes had always appealed to her, but he had an impatient, rather sarcastic nature that came from too much privilege and too few responsibilities, and that did not sit well with her. All in all, she was probably more suited to Alexander Kievnall, although it grated on her that Alexander, strong, brave warrior and champion that he was, had actually approached her father and brothers before discussing the matter with her. As if she didn't have the most to say regarding whom, if anyone, she married.

"You don't wish to discuss it?" Saren pushed.

"No, I do not."

He shrugged, not bothered in the least by her rejection of the subject. Her honesty and innocence were refreshing and enticing. The fact of the matter was, she would be his wife, although she didn't know it yet. No one did. Not even his parents. He referred to them as the king and queen, because they behaved as if they were—but they were not. His mother was a duchess, his father, merely noble by marriage. They possessed wealth, and they could put on airs all they wished, but they would not stop him from marrying the woman of his

choosing. Besides, they adored Ammey. Everyone adored her. In time, they would accept her as a daughter.

They approached the grounds of Stonewater Forge from the rear and left their horses at the stable. Saren kept a half step behind Ammey, not so much in chivalry, but to better observe her as she walked. There was no pretense to Ammey; which is what he most enjoyed about her. She was slender, but she was also healthy and strong with a great vibrancy. Female or not, she was McKeaf through and through.

They went in a back door and walked a short corridor to the kitchen. Ammey came to a halt, momentarily stunned not only by the chaos and activity but by the crates of food that blocked the back stairwell she had been planning to use. But, of course—they had scores of men to feed. With a sigh of resignation, she turned abruptly and collided into Saren. He grinned and backed out of her way and she walked on, silently cursing her tendency to blush.

The drone of male voices grew louder as they made their way to the front of the hall because of the several groups of men talking amongst themselves. Ammey kept walking, but felt herself stiffen. She loathed the attention she drew in a crowd such as this. Most of it was due to the respect and admiration men felt for her family, for her father, but it was still uncomfortable when directed at her. She saw one of her brothers, Tom, a split second before he saw her. She frowned as he started toward her with a scowl on his face. "There you are," he snapped when he reached her. "Don't be

disappearing," he ordered. "We have too much to do to worry over where you've gotten off to."

Ammey shook his hand off her elbow. "You needn't worry about me," she snapped back. "I can take care of myself."

"I escorted her home, Tom," Saren explained. "She was needed at Thender to hold Julia's hand through yet another crisis."

Tom grunted, indicating she was forgiven.

"So, how many have shown?" Saren asked, looking around.

"Thirty-eight."

There were many more men in attendance than that, but Tom wouldn't be counting the servants and attendants of the great men. He would only count those that were of military use.

"They've been trickling in steadily, so we've yet to get started," Tom explained.

"Who is that?" Saran asked, nodding toward a man who looked vaguely familiar.

"It's Folworth, heir to the throne of Qaddys. He's said to be shrewd, a highly ambitious man."

Ammey felt herself being watched. She followed her instinct and discovered an entire group of strange men staring at her from inside the great room. It was distressing, and she quickly looked away. "I'm going to my room," she said to Saren and Tom. Not that they were listening. She turned to walk away, nearly colliding with a man, a handsome stranger, with laughing gray eyes.

"I beg your pardon," the stranger said at once.

It was her second collision or near-collision in a matter of minutes, enough to fray her nerves, especially in light of the number of strangers who were observing her. "Pardon me," she replied.

A tall, fair-haired man closed in on her from behind, placing his hands on her shoulders and startling her yet again. "My sister," David McKeaf said to the gray-eyed stranger. "Ammey."

"I could tell," the stranger said pleasantly.

"This is Jan Meade of Shilbridge," David continued as he moved around to her side.

Jan bowed his head. "A pleasure."

Ammey did likewise. "You've come a long way."

"Yes. Annie, was it?" Jan asked.

"Ammey," she replied.

"As in—" David teased.

She drew a quick breath and frowned at him.

"As if it were short for Amaryllis—which it's not," David said.

Jan looked pensive. "Hmmm. I'm not supposed to ask what it's short for, if, indeed anything."

"Oh, you could ask," David said. "But I'm afraid it's a guarded family secret."

Ammey felt certain she must be scarlet with embarrassment. "It was a pleasure to have made your acquaintance, sir," Ammey said to Jan Meade, with every intention of leaving.

Jan Meade bowed again. "And yours, lady."

David turned his head to discreetly speak into her ear. "Ammey, you must stay close."

She heard the urgency in his voice and looked up at him. The concern in his face was enough to frighten her. David was the calm sort, always in control, always slow to anger. He did not overreact. He was a good man, her favorite brother and, if he was worried, there was reason for worry. She acknowledged his warning and moved toward the wide staircase that led up to the family's bedchambers.

Jan Meade watched her go with frank admiration in his expressive eyes. So far, everything about Stonewater Forge was impressive. The General, his sons, his daughter, the spacious wood and stone residence. Their blacksmith operation was the largest he'd ever seen and the weapons they manufactured were of superior quality. All of the southern valley was a place of remarkable pastoral beauty. Still, it was the McKeaf family that most intrigued him. Most of the General's children—David, Tom, Dane and now Ammey—resembled him. They had his golden hair and green eyes. The other siblings, Anthony and David, had dark, nearly black hair and eyes. "Your mother must have been dark," Jan mused.

David turned back to him. "Yes. She was Castilian."

"Your siblings," Jan said. "Either light or dark."

"As if we came directly from the Kingdom of Castile or the Royal Kingdom of Meath."

"Meath," Jan mused. "West of England?"

Dave nodded. "Except for Nicolas, the youngest. Their lines seemed to have finally mixed in him, brown hair, brown eyes."

"Gather," a deep voice bellowed. "Gather!"

"I supposed we're to finally get started," David remarked.

Outside the hall, Anthony, the firstborn McKeaf, heard the summons and turned to go in. His eyes had been trained on the pale smoke rising in the distance.

"Your attention, please," Amador Ayala boomed from inside the great room. "Your attention! I give you Rehan Isolde, heir to Nawllah."

The room quieted as Isolde made his way to a makeshift stage. Everyone knew that Rehan Isolde spoke quietly. The descendant of a long line of royalty, he'd never had to speak loudly in order to be heard.

By the time Isolde had begun speaking, Anthony McKeaf had made his way to the front of the crowd and taken his place next to his father.

"I knew the elder Corin," Rehan Isolde began. He had a lazy, almost slurring style of speech that made one initially wonder if he'd been nipping at a wine jug. "We would have never been in this position were he still alive."

There was enough of a rumbling, that Amador Ayala turned his glare upon the room to quiet them. At nearly seven feet tall, he towered above most of the others, even his brother in law, the McKeaf himself.

"The various cities, towns and villages of Azulland have lived as peaceful, but separate entities," Isolde continued. "We can no longer exist in this way. We must unite and

present a force, sufficient to quash any and all tyranny. These are dangerous times. Not only do we face civil strife, but we must be ever mindful that our neighbors watch and observe. We are especially watched from the Iberian Peninsula. There is no more Aragon; there is no more Castile, now we have the Union of the Crowns. They are ambitious, and they will seek to pounce and claim our country as part of their union, if we look vulnerable."

"We must band together!" a voice called out.

"I seek and accept the military guidance of the McKeaf," Isolde concluded.

"Hear-hear," men called out. "McKeaf!"

Rehan Isolde raised his hand to be heard, and waited until the din died back down before speaking again. "While we must build a united force, we must also seek to negotiate peace if possible. I call for an envoy to go to Bellux-Abry. We will demand an audience with Corin and make our position understood."

Now, it was the McKeaf himself who stepped forward to quiet the room. He'd earned widely held respect and admiration, first in the war with the Franks, and later, in the Leviathan uprising. "Rhuoque Castle was attacked, part of it burned," he announced.

Eyes grew large and disbelieving, faces distorted with anger and fear, and a clamor ensued, part confusion and part denial. Rhuoque was to the southwest, which meant the attackers, most likely the infamous wolves of Bellux-Abry, had skirted the Forge to get there.

"What we know," General Lucas McKeaf began again, knowing the crowd would quiet, which they did. "What we know," he repeated, "is that Corin has launched a two-part campaign, the first to annex neighboring cities, the other to terrorize and weaken the rest of the kingdom. We must assume part three will be open warfare on all that oppose his expansion."

As soon as it was quiet enough to be heard, he beckoned his eldest son to come forward. Anthony McKeaf did not bear much physical resemblance to his father, and yet, as they stood side by side, anyone could see the commonalities—the stance, the stoic concentration, the strength. Anthony was shorter in height, but had the same thick neck, broad chest and sinewy arms. "The destructors travel lightly, in groups of only a dozen or even less," Anthony began. "They're trained well, held in high esteem, and are utterly loyal to Corin. They refer to themselves as wolves, ostensibly because they're vicious and travel in packs." He paused. "I prefer to refer to them as dogs."

There was a ripple of laughter, but it ended quickly.

"We've not had to form an army in two decades. But we must now. We must make a giant fist and push Bellux-Abry back, perhaps even into the sea."

There was a roar of approval. Anthony was a man of passion, and his passion was thoroughly contagious.

Fourteen-year old Nicolas McKeaf pushed through the throng to deliver the message that a meal was ready and waiting. He was proud to have a part to play, however small. He was proud to be a McKeaf. He had not fully realized before

today what a revered name it was. He got his father's attention and passed on the message.

"We'll eat," Lucas announced. "And plan." He waved the crowd toward the dining hall, where food and drink had been set out. His sons held back from the surge forward and then fell in step beside him. "Battalions must be planned," Lucas said, thinking aloud. "Couriers dispatched to every village and hamlet in the free kingdom." He stopped and looked them each in the eye. "This cannot become our fight. We lead, we delegate, but every able-bodied man must come forward to bear his share of the burden."

The younger McKeaf's nodded, and the group continued forward again. "Anthony, David," Lucas McKeaf said. "Work with Ciro and begin planning battalions. Strong leadership at the head of every battalion, trained in the art of battle. There will be no buying of commissions."

Anthony nodded in full agreement and continued into the dining hall.

"Richard, Tom," the McKeaf continued, "We need reliable couriers, twenty, at least. We will need both men and supplies, and every village will need to be accountable. Work out a system. Bring in anyone you need to help."

"Sloane," Tom said to Richard. "And Padrig. They can help."

The two followed Anthony into the dining hall, discussing who would be useful and in what role.

"And me?" Dane asked.

"Stay close to Isolde," Lucas said quietly as he looked over the tables of men feasting. He sought out the heir to Nawllah

and found him deep in conversation with the men around him. "This time, they must be accountable, according to their position and population."

"What shall I tell him?"

The General looked at his son. "I will tell him I'm making you his lieutenant. He'll understand."

"Shall I get Ammey?" David asked.

"She won't wish to come down," Dane said.

"Yes, get her," the McKeaf decided.

* * * *

DAVID KNOCKED on Ammey's door and then walked in. "Come eat."

Ammey looked up from her book. "With fifty strange men? I do not think so."

"Come," he insisted. "Father wants you to."

There was something about his intensity that propelled her to her feet. "What's happening?"

He sighed and lowered his head to the top of hers.

She suddenly felt rigid with fear and uncertainty. Whatever was happening was more serious than she'd realized. "Will it ... come to war?"

He pulled back. "Yes. I think so."

She swallowed. "But we're so far away from it," she reasoned.

"We can't wait for Corin to knock on our door. If we don't stop him, he'll conquer everything between him and us. Every time he annexes a city, or destroys a village, he becomes

stronger and we become weaker." He grabbed hold of her hand and began pulling her toward the door. "Now, come on."

She resisted. "I do not wish to dine with a hall full of men I do not know."

"This is your home," David reminded her. "And who knows how many more meals our family will have together?"

She frowned at him for his approach.

He acted on his advantage and pulled her along behind him. "You'll sit between father and myself," he consoled her. "And I dare anyone to ogle you."

* * * *

BUT THEY DID LOOK, as she knew they would. They watched her as she entered the room, and they continued watching as she took her place near the head of the first table. Many went back to eating, or talking, whatever they'd been doing before she appeared, but some continued to stare. It didn't help matters that she could see Alexander Kievnall watching her out of the corner of her eye. They hadn't spoken since he'd asked her father for permission to court her, then discussed the possibility of marriage with his closest friend, her brother, David. The fact that he had spoken to them but not to her said much about him as far as she was concerned. Despite that irritation, he was attractive and possessed impressive strength, height, health and intelligence. He would make a good husband and a good father.

Anthony was also bothered by the stares directed at his sister. Ammey was a beauty, although they rarely noticed

anymore. Unfortunately, one couldn't help but be reminded with so many others about who were not accustomed to it. He had never felt nearly as protective of Theresa, but she'd been a different person. She'd not only welcomed ogling, she'd encouraged it. Theresa was more of his mother's line, like himself, while Ammey was pure Celt, like their father.

Jan Meade was fascinated by the daughter of the McKeaf. How odd that she could look so like the General, and yet be as lovely as any woman he'd ever seen or even imagined. Lucas McKeaf, after all, was not a particularly handsome man. His sons were, but the General had a strong face with a rather wide nose and a strong jaw, too strong and pronounced for him to be considered comely. David looked the most like him, and David would not have been considered particularly handsome either. Tom, Dane and Ammey all resembled one another strongly, especially Dane and Ammey. They had the golden hair of their father, and the same green eyes, but their features were pleasing and even.

Had one not known Anthony and Richard were related to the others, one would not have supposed it. Nicolas was a different matter; you could see the McKeaf in his young face. What a legacy, Jan thought to himself. Would it be a happy quest to live up to or a never-ending burden?

* * * *

THE MEAL ENDED but the diners stayed put, talking amongst themselves. Jugs of wine and ale were replenished and Ammey settled in, listening to the talk and watching the

faces and gestures of whomever caught her eye for the moment.

It was obvious that Rehan Isolde was bored by the fat man speaking to him. Ammey didn't know the fat man, but it seemed apparent he was obsequious, even fawning. She would not have cared for him either. Tom was frowning as he wrote something, which was typical, and Richard was relaxed, observant and deep in thought, also typical. A redheaded man she'd never seen before caught her eye and bowed his head slightly, but not so much that his eyes left hers. She nodded back and turned away, directly into the searching gaze of her father. She blinked in surprise. "What is it?"

"You watch others, as I do," he remarked.

She smiled. "You can tell much about a man by the way he interacts with those around him."

Lucas McKeaf leaned forward. "And what of Alexander?" he asked, quietly, as not to be overheard. "I notice you are not observing him, and he's working so diligently to get your attention."

Her father's eyes were dancing with merriment, which surprised her. It was strange, amidst the talk and preparations of war.

"Saren," Amador exclaimed.

All eyes turned toward Saren, who had appeared in the door, looking pale and deeply shaken.

"It's my sister," Saren blurted, his face stark white. "She's missing." He sought out Ammey with his eyes. "She and her escorts never made it back to the castle."

Ammey struggled to breathe and understand what could have happened.

Two men braced Saren. They helped him to the table and a goblet of wine was brought to him. "I have a terrible feeling," he muttered. "A terrible ... feeling."

Ammey stood, as had many of the others.

David turned to her. "You were with her today?"

Her throat felt too tight to speak. "Y-yes," she stammered. "We weren't far from the castle when she was made to go back. She went with two of their men."

"Did you recognize them?" Alexander spoke up. He'd come around the table and was standing next to her.

"Yes. Yes, of course." Everyone was talking at once. She felt dizzy and strange.

"Sit down," Alexander said. He took hold of her arms and eased her back into her chair.

It was already dark, Ammey realized. Julia was missing, she had been for hours, and it was too dark to search for her tonight. Julia—missing. How could that be? She'd been in a rebellious frame of mind and she had wanted to get away, but with her escort, it simply would not have been possible. Would it?

Ammey's mind was racing but she clearly heard the words search and torches and her heart leapt with hope. They were going to search. She got back to her feet, anxious for action.

"Some men need to stay behind," the McKeaf ordered.

"The rest should search."

"You will stay," Anthony directed to his sister, stabbing his finger toward her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You will not tell me what to do," she retorted hotly.

"You will stay," Lucas stated flatly.

Ammey glared at Anthony, but it only made him more determined to cage her. Men were already moving out in a rush of activity. Ammey caught Saren's eye and they exchanged a look of fear and guilt, and then he was gone, too.

* * * *

IT WAS A STRANGE, too-quiet evening that stretched into an agonizing night. Ammey paced around her room and each circuit ended on her balcony, staring out for a sign of someone. She grew exhausted, but she couldn't settle, not even to sit.

By first light, she felt sick from the knot in her stomach. She wrapped in her warmest cloak and made her way into Dane's chambers at the end of the floor. She walked through to his balcony, which overlooked the side grounds, and provided the best view of the southeastern grounds that led to Thender. The morning air was cool, but she felt chilled to the bone. It was due to fear, she knew, because something was terribly wrong.

Minutes passed, an hour, and then she saw the group, the entire group, coming back in mass. She realized she was holding her breath and let it out. The wait was over, and the news was as bad as she'd spent the night fearing; she could tell. *Julia*. She wanted to scream the name, to scream in agony, but she didn't.

The riders drew closer. She could make out their haggard, drawn faces. Dane looked up at her, allowing her to read his grief. It confirmed what her instinct had been whispering all night. Julia was dead. *Dead.* But how? Why? Ammey tore her eyes away from her brother's and issued a silent prayer for Julia's soul. Tears streamed down her face and turned cold on her skin.

The sight of Ammey, so pale in her gray wrap, was heart wrenching. She was so beautiful, so alive and filled with promise, and yet so stricken. The wind tossed her hair and tears glistened on her face. Most of the men returning noticed her. Lucas McKeaf saw her and had to fight his own battle with emotion. Anthony saw her and felt a surge of renewed fury over what Julia Cator had suffered. Alexander Kievnall saw her and unwittingly tensed so hard, his horse came to a momentary halt.

* * * *

AMMEY TURNED and began the walk back to her own room, feeling light, almost numb. Now that she knew, she didn't want to. She wanted Julia to have simply to have run for the adventure of it. Her escorts would have followed to protect her. In the corridor, Ammey heard footsteps, and, seconds later, David and Dane appeared at the head of the stairs, then Anthony. David walked to her and placed strong hands on her arms, but she averted her eyes. She did not want to learn what they had discovered.

"Ammey-"

She tried to pull away, but David wouldn't allow it. "Let go of me," she begged.

"Ammey," Anthony said sharply. "Look at me."

"Leave her alone," Dane said quietly. "She knows."

"We cannot leave her alone," Anthony insisted. "This has changed everything."

Richard joined them, but stood back watching and listening.

"She knows," Dane insisted.

Anthony put an arm around his sister and gripped the back of her neck. It felt thin and frail in his hand. How easy it would be for a man to snap it. "Listen to me," he demanded. "Julia is dead. She was murdered."

Ammey refused to look at him, to look at any of them, but the tears continued to flow.

"Are you hearing me?"

Dane scowled at his eldest brother who always had to have things his way. "She hears you."

Richard walked on to his room, pausing only to mutter, "I'm sorry, Ammey."

"How?" Ammey asked in a thick voice.

Anthony and David exchanged a look. Neither of them spoke.

Ammey looked at David first, then at Anthony.

"It was ... violent," Anthony said haltingly. "That's all you need know."

She could not believe her ears. That's all she needed to know? He was the one insisting she accept the truth. It had changed everything, he'd said.

"Corin's wolves," Dane said quietly.

A wave of nausea gripped her. "Are you certain?" she whispered.

He nodded. "They took her captive and went to Vhahas cavern," he explained quietly.

"She doesn't need to know the details," Anthony hissed.

Ammey pulled away from the imprisonment of their grips and their over-protectiveness. "Yes I do!"

"She was hurt," David said, shaking his head. "And then—" "Cut," Anthony supplied, when David faltered.

Ammey looked at Dane. She could tell much more by his haunted expression than by her eldest brothers words.

Tom was heard coming up the stairs. He had a distinctive step. "Father wants to see you," he announced, looking at Ammey.

"Surely, it can wait till tomorrow," David replied.

It wasn't David's words, but the edge of worry and sadness that filled her with trepidation. "What is it?" she asked.

"I'll go with you," Dane offered.

"He wants to send me away," she guessed. She waited but no one denied it. She folded her arms, stubbornly. "I'm not going," she stated. "I'm safer here."

"It's not safe here," Anthony snapped.

David eased her forward. "Let's go."

It was decided, she realized. They had already discussed it and made up their minds. "Where? Where would I go?"

* * * *

"YOU WILL GO to Wydenyl," her father said. He was pacing the length of his study, his arms crossed, an angry frown on his face.

Ammey felt charged with alarm.

"It's not far, and it's safe," he reasoned.

"I can fight, too," she declared passionately. "As well as my brothers."

"Don't speak nonsense," Lucas yelled.

He never yelled at her, and it worked to silence her.

Lucas turned away from her expression of shock and betrayal. "I cannot do what I need to do and worry about your safety every minute. Neither can your brothers."

She blinked back tears.

"Do you want to be a distraction when we most need our wits?" he demanded. He knew he was hurting her, and it made him ache. His sons were his pride, but she was his heart.

Anthony, David and Dane left their father's study. Ammey needed to be kept safe, but she had the courage to fight. Only respect for their father subdued her. They knew that and they did not wish to witness the crushing of her spirit.

"I'm sorry for what's happened," the General said, reaching out for his daughter.

Ammey went to him, but she felt no consolation from his embrace. He had mandated she would go, and so she would. She had never disobeyed him, nor would she, but leaving now felt frightening and final, as if she would never see any of them again.

ANTHONY PACED the corridor, while his brothers stood resolutely by. All of them were thinking the same thing. Plans had to be firmed up and put into motion. They didn't have to plan for an invasion; it was upon them.

"Will we bother sending an envoy to Corin?" Dane asked.

"That can be left to the politicians among us." Disgust was evident in Anthony's tone, as he did not hold politicians in high regard.

"Who should escort Ammey?" David asked.

"Cael," Anthony replied firmly. He trusted Cael completely.

"And Zenon," David decided.

"Yes," Anthony agreed, then his expression hardened.
"We'll see to it, then we'll follow the dog's tracks, find them, and cut them each into a hundred pieces."

"We need a large enough force," David mused. "But we can't leave the Forge unprotected. We don't know how many of Corin's units are about or where they are."

"Let's get to it," Anthony said, as he started off.

"I'll be there presently," David replied. "I want to see Ammey."

Anthony turned back. "It's for the best that she goes."

David nodded grimly. He was not in disagreement with the decision to keep her in seclusion, but he felt for her loss and her pain. "Julia was her friend."

Dane folded his arms and tried to block the memory that flooded his mind. Julia had been so violated. He'd never known a body to be so violated. It made him shutter.

Anthony, too, thought of the desecrated remains of Julia Cator and gripped his hands together. It was enough to make a man drop to his knees and retch the remains of his last meal, but there wasn't time to dwell on it. "We all cared for her, which is why we'll hunt down her murderers and slaughter them." He turned on his heel and walked away.

Dane and David exchanged a look. "I should help," David said.

"I'll take care of her," Dane promised.

David nodded slowly. "I'll send for Cael and Zenon. They'll be ready when she is."

* * * *

AMMEY SHOVED her surcoat into her pack.

"It's not punishment, Ammey," Dane said.

"I know it's not. I know it's not supposed to be," she amended.

"Cael and Zenon are taking you. They're waiting."

She shook her head. "They're two of our best men. Why waste them on this?"

"It's not a waste. There's nothing more important to any of us than keeping you safe."

"Then I should go away. Baba was right, I must be a distraction." She sat on the edge of her bed and ran a hand through her hair. It was tangled. Not that she cared. She was too tired and distraught to care.

Dane sat beside her.

"Tell me," Ammey begged quietly. "Please. I ... have to know." No one else would tell her, but Dane would. The two

of them were less than a year apart in age. They had always been close and of like mind.

"We found the guards first," he began slowly, staring straight ahead. "They'd been butchered and left." He swallowed. There were seven attackers, maybe eight. We followed their tracks to the cavern, but saw they'd already left. There were fresh tracks heading east."

He grew silent and she waited. She'd begun shaking again, and hoped he wouldn't notice.

"She was ... lying over a rock, naked. She'd been raped."

Ammey squeezed her eyes shut and a scalding tear rolled down her face.

"Badly," Dane whispered. "She'd been badly used." He cleared his throat. "I tried to stop Saren from seeing her, but—"

Ammey worked at drawing a quiet breath. If she allowed a sob to escape her, Dane would stop telling her, and she needed to know.

"When she was turned over—"

His voice broke, and Ammey put her arms around him. They rocked in shared grief.

"Oh, Ammey, it made us all sick, but it nearly destroyed Saren. And all I could think was ... what if it had been you?" She shook her head, unable to speak.

Suddenly Dane stood and wiped his face. "You have to go." Something important was remaining unsaid; she could feel it. "How was she killed?"

He looked at her. "They cut her heart out." His voice was strained, and he had to look away from her again and collect himself.

A wave of dizziness overwhelmed her and she didn't dare speak or move. Moments later she heard herself whisper, "Why her?" without even realizing she'd spoken.

"I only know they're beasts," he replied. "Worse than wild animals. We have to hunt them down and destroy them." He walked forward to get her pack. "You have to go."

She stood and rubbed her arms. She felt so numb, so invisible.

Dane kissed each of her cheeks. "We'll come to get you as soon as it's safe."

CHAPTER 2: The Assassins

AMMEY RODE behind Zenon nearly the entire way to Wydenyl without uttering a word. Not only was she being forced to go into seclusion, she was not even allowed to ride her own horse. As if she was a helpless child, or perhaps it was that she was not trustworthy enough to stay put. It was insulting.

"They only want what's best for you," Cael said, trying to make conversation again.

"Why are men always so certain they know what's best?" Ammey retorted.

Cael laughed. "Is that why you wore the tunic and leggings? To get back at them?"

Ammey gave him a sour look. "I always ride in them. How childish do you think I am, Cael?"

"No, not childish," he replied, shaking his head, but still smiling broadly. "I'm only concerned for the effect you'll have on the holy men."

"I brought an overgown to put on. They'll never see—"

A woman's terrified scream split the air, and Cael and Zenon reacted, reining in their mounts sharply.

"Do you smell that?" Zenon asked quietly. Ammey felt his body tense, not fully cognizant that hers had, as well.

The wind suddenly shifted and the smell of smoke was heavy in their nostrils. Another scream, this one punctuated.

Zenon was suddenly furious at himself for not being more on guard. He shifted and offered his arm to Ammey. "Get down. Stay here."

She obeyed without argument. This she did because of the screams, because she understood their duty to find the cause. They did have to answer to her father and brothers. Still, they were just outside of Wydenyl, an ancient village settled by separatist druids a thousand years past. There were not many of the order left, but those that were, the village fathers, were pacifists, holy men, and Wydenyl was considered sanctum sanctorum. Whatever was happening could not be too terrible. Perhaps a woman was being flogged for setting fire to an enemy's house. It was terrible for the woman, of course—

Ammey imagined what Tom's surly reply would have been. "Always one to let your imagination run away with you."

Ammey held up her hand to ward off the morning glare, and watched as Cael and Zenon approached the eastern gate. Without warning, Cael jerked around, coming completely off his horse. He was facing her now, an incredulous look on his face. It was so bizarre a sight, Ammey nearly laughed out loud, but then Cael dropped to his knees, and Ammey's amused expression vanished, replaced by one of horror as saw the dart stuck in this throat. A single line of blood ran from its poisoned tip.

In the instant it took for his body to fall forward, Ammey was snatched from behind, a strong hand clamped over her mouth. "Don't make a sound," a man hissed in her ear. "The village is under siege." She was dragged backwards into a

grove of trees and further, into a furry bana tree. The soft, pliable limbs engulfed and hid them from view, but they also prevented her from seeing what was happening, and Zenon was still out there. Cael was hurt. She tried to pull the hand from her face, but her effort only resulted in her captor assuming a tighter grip. She panicked and strained against it, shaking the limbs of the furry bana.

"Do you wish to die?" he hissed. "There are a dozen men out there who wish nothing more than to ravage your body until you're dead."

She stopped struggling. The description was too close to what had happened to Julia, and the thought made her feel ill. Indeed, she heard distant male voices and stopped breathing.

"Should we burn them with the others?" one called.

Them. Burn them with the others. The words rang over and over again in her mind.

"No," came a brusque reply. "Leave them. Let's go." There was the sound of several horses, riding away.

Ammey's captor loosened his grip, but did not let go of her. It no longer mattered. She felt weak with fear and grief, so much so that the arms around her had become a comfort. Seconds passed, minutes. Ammey sunk into the hold, her entire being shaking with the beat of her heart.

"They're gone," a deep, male voice spoke from a short distance away.

Her captor finally released his hold. "You can go," he said.

She moved her jaw, still feeling the imprint of his hand on her face, and tried to move, but suddenly, her legs weren't able to.

"You can go," the man repeated.

She reached out an arm and clutched a soft limb, but her legs would not cooperate with her wish to move.

Apparently impatient with her, the man wrapped an arm around her waist and dragged her out, just as he had dragged her in.

She winced at the sunlight as they immerged from the tree, so quickly had her eyes adjusted to the shade of the furry bana. A man with black skin gaped at her, and two other men were moving toward them. "You take shelter in a tree and come out with that?" the black man asked. The sight of him was strange to her. Was he a Moor? She had seen black men before, though not many.

"She was with the two that rode in," her captor spoke.

Ammey saw Cael and Zenon lying on the ground and she rushed to them, past the dark skinned man, who turned to watch her.

Zenon was face up, staring sightlessly at the sky; Cael was face down. Ammey dropped to her knees and felt for signs of life in Zenon, despite the certainty of his death stare. She reached for Cael, next. They were dead. Dead. Because they'd brought her to this place. They were young, healthy, handsome men, neither of whom had seen their twenty-fifth winter yet, and they were dead. They'd been trusted friends and far too valuable to die for no reason. She'd said they

were too valuable to be wasted on escorting her! Hadn't she said that? Furious, agonizing grief tore a sob from her chest.

"Where did you come from?" the black man asked her. He'd walked close, as had the others, four of them.

She looked up at the black man, incensed by his calm. "Wydenyl was attacked, and you just stand there?" she demanded. Her voice was shaking as hard as the rest of her. Her face was wet with tears that would not stop.

"We should go," one of the men spoke with urgency to his voice. "The village is burning."

It was true. The roaring and crackling of fire was stronger now. Wydenyl was burning. Her gut and her chest were burning. Cael and Zenon were dead because of her. The wind shifted, enveloping them all in a smoke so thick, she couldn't see.

"Let's go," the black man ordered. "We have to get downwind."

"No," she argued, getting to her feet. "We have to help them." A hand closed in on her and began pulling her away. "Unhand me! We have to help them!"

The hand let go of her, but a second later, she felt pressure on her stomach, followed by the sensation of being lifted off the ground. Someone had thrown her over their shoulder and was hurrying away. Ammey, choking on both the smoke and her embarrassment, pounded the man's back with her fists. "Put me down!"

He answered with a stinging series of slaps to her rear end, made more potent by the thin fabric of her leggings. It worked to increase both her humiliation and her ire and she

pounded harder. So did he. When he finally set her down in a smoke-free clearing, she launched herself forward at him, red-faced in her fury. He must have been expecting the move because he grabbed her wrists as she came at him, slung her around and then sat her on the ground. "You hit me first," he reminded her. "And there is nobody left to help!"

Even scowling, he was extremely handsome, which only served to increase her humiliation. His hair was brown, his beard and mustache neatly trimmed, his eyes a rich golden brown.

The black man, obviously the leader of the band, knelt on one knee. "We have much to do, little hellcat, so perhaps you could simply tell us who you are and what you and your friends back there were doing."

"Or perhaps you could tell me who you are and what you were doing," she snapped. Her behind was smarting, her face hot with mortification and rage.

"Forzenay's the name," he replied.

She drew in a sharp breath, not expecting this.

"You've heard the name."

"The assassin?" she said in a suddenly small voice.

"Forzenay's Five," she murmured, looking at the others. *The infamous assassins of Azulland*.

"This is Kidder," Forzenay said, gesturing to one of the men. "Graybil, Stripe—" he gestured to a man with a stripe-like scar on one side of his face. "And you've already met Vincent," Forzenay finished with a smug grin, gesturing to her captor.

"Charmed," Vincent said sardonically.

She was tempted to flail at him again, but they would only restrain her. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, directing the question to Forzenay. "And why didn't you help them?"

"We did help, little hellcat ... in a discreet enough manner that Corin's men would not know."

"You helped?" she repeated, her voice dripping with scorn. "Discreetly?"

"That's right."

"You did not help my friends. You did not help that woman I heard scream. Perhaps you were too discreet. When the victims of a massacre do not realize you exist—"

"Who are you?" Forzenay spoke sharply, interrupting her tirade.

"I am Ammey McKeaf," she replied, raising her chin slightly.

Forzenay's eyes narrowed, then they roamed her face. "Of course. I should have seen it."

"Daughter of the McKeaf," Vincent said quietly, shaking his head.

"Your father is a good man," Stripe spoke up.

"A good friend," Kidder added.

She frowned. "You know my father?"

"Listen to the doubt in her voice," Vincent exclaimed. "Why would we lie?"

"I don't know you," she replied more calmly than she felt.
"How would I know?"

"She makes a point," Forzenay conceded.

A crash shook the ground, a painful reminder of an unspeakable loss, and Ammey turned to stare at the burning village. "All those people."

"No," Forzenay said. "We learned of the plan to sack Wydenyl and warned them," he explained. "They have an underground tunnel everyone was supposed to have escaped by. I heard the woman, the same as you." He shook his head. "Things go wrong, but most got to safety."

Ammey breathed out, deeply surprised by this. "H-how did you learn of the attack?"

"We've been tracking the leaders, the planners of the raids," Forzenay said. "As your father knows."

"My father knows?" she repeated, stunned.

"We're on the same side, Ammey McKeaf," Stripe added.

"Why are you at Wydenyl?" Kidder asked in a mild voice. He wasn't remarkable looking in any way, except for wide, deep blue eyes. If she hadn't known better, she would have called them innocent eyes, like that of a child.

"There have b-been attacks," she stammered. Her nerves were suddenly playing havoc with her powers of speech. "My father and brothers thought I would be safe."

"You should have been," Graybil replied grimly, staring at the leaping flames in the distance.

"Corin will pay for this," Forzenay declared. "Wydenyl was sacrosanct. It will force opinion against him. Even those who were unwilling to declare—"

"We should move on," Stripe interrupted, nervous about the fire spreading. "At least make it into the forest tonight."

Forzenay held up a hand. "In a moment. What attacks?" he asked, pointing to Ammey.

The gesture disturbed her and she stared at his hand, noticing its pale underside. "Rhuoque Castle was attacked," she replied.

Forzenay dropped his hand, his expression cold. "When?" Ammey shook her head. "Yesterday, the day before. I'm not certain."

"Rhuoque. South," Stripe said, looking at the others. "That's not our men."

"You said attacks," Forzenay repeated, his eyes never leaving Ammey's.

She nodded but she could not utter a word. Her throat had closed.

"Where else?" Forzenay pushed.

"Thender," she managed weakly.

"Thender?"

She nodded. "The daughter of the house was—"

"The Cators of Thender?" Kidder asked quietly, squatting down.

Ammey looked away from the pain in his blue eyes and felt her tears begin again. She angrily wiped her face.

"The daughter of the house was murdered?" Forzenay asked.

She nodded, unable to speak.

"It was Corin's men? Is that what your father thought?" She nodded again. "Yes."

"Was it the same men who attacked Rhuoque?"

"I don't know," she replied. *Curse these tears*, she thought as she used both hands to dry her face, unknowingly smearing thin streaks of dirt across her face.

The men gave her a few moments to collect herself.

"When did this happen?" Forzenay asked as gently as he could.

"Yesterday," Ammey replied. "Afternoon," she clarified. "Julia and her escort were attacked. Her men were killed immediately. She was ... t-taken to Vhahas cavern and—"

What she was not saying was every bit as clear to them as what she was.

"There were seven or eight of them," she said, trying to recall what Dane had told her. "They thought ... by the tracks."

"That means there are at least three units in the valley," Vincent spoke up.

Forzenay stood. "Ammey McKeaf, you'll come with us." She drew back. "What? No. Where?"

"Into Vihlae forest, to seek the council of Elpis."

"The coven of Elpis? The witches?" She looked around, surprised to see they all looked in earnest. "You cannot believe they're real."

He held out his hand to help her up. "They do not call themselves witches."

"I cannot go with you. I have to return home."

"If the seidhkona tells us it's safe, you'll be returned to the Forge," Forzenay stated.

"You cannot compel me to go," she said, trying to remain calm and reasonable.

"Yes, I can."

"My father needs to know—"

"Your father needs to accomplish what is begun," Forzenay interrupted. "He has more responsibility than any man should, as do your brothers. They will know about your men soon enough."

Ammey battled a fresh wave of grief. "We, at least, have to bury—"

"There's no time," he replied, cutting her off.

"But I have nothing. Our horses were taken, and my pack." The five men were ignoring her. She was surrounded and hustled forward. "I am not your responsibility," she insisted.

"You are until the seidhkona tells us otherwise," Forzenay replied.

"Who is the seidhkona?"

"Milainah, leader of the council."

"But-"

"There's no use arguing. We cannot leave you behind, and we must seek Milainah's counsel."

"Why? What is so important in the forest of Vihlae?"

"You ask too many questions," Vincent spoke up.

"You'd be full of questions, too," Kidder reminded him.

Ammey looked at Kidder, appreciative that he'd spoken up for her.

"They know things," Kidder explained.

* * * *

AS THEY CAME TO THE HORSES, Ammey continued following Kidder but Vincent, who had already mounted, yanked her off her feet as she walked by and positioned her in front of himself. Of all of them, he was the one she wanted the least to do with and she told him so.

"Too bad," he replied as he spurred his horse into motion.

She swung her leg over the horse's head, to have a measure of control, then felt his arms clamp around her. "I can ride. You needn't hold on so tight," she complained.

He tightened his grip, practically cutting off her air supply. "Any other complaints, ladyship?" he said directly at her ear.

The sensation of his moving lips and warm breath against her ear caused her breath to catch, and she turned her face away from him as much as possible, resentful of her body responding without the consent of her will.

* * * *

KEARY, THE BLACKSMITH, couldn't help himself. He'd always been one that had to know the worst of a situation and he had to know how the village had fared. Why they'd been a target, he could not fathom, but Forzenay's Five had said it was true and the village fathers had believed the warning. Villagers had been told to take only that which was most essential to their survival. His wife had taken food and bedrolls, and he'd taken his most prized tools, his hammers, anvil and tongs. He'd spent too long breaking them in just right; he was not leaving them behind.

He smelled smoke before he got to the clearing and his heart began pounding. He kept moving, all the while

preparing himself for the damage he was likely to see beyond the wall. He made it to the clearing, but there was no wall. It was gone. It was all gone. Keary's jaw went slack at the sight of the blackened ruins of his village. They'd burnt it. They had really, truly burnt it.

There were bundles on the ground that drew his attention. He stared, uncomprehendingly, until he realized they were bodies—the bodies of those that had refused to heed the fathers' dictates to vacate the village, or the bodies of those who had returned to fetch something more after initially leaving. He dropped to his knees and pushed a fist against his mouth, grieving for lost lives and the loss of their village.

Movement drew his gaze to one particular heap. It was Raeka! Her face was black with soot, and her clothes had been torn, but she was alive, crawling toward the forest. "Help me," she moaned.

He started to his feet, but a shriek above his head startled him. He choked back a strangled cry and shrank away from the sight of the hideous, pasty-white, somewhat-human looking creatures with blue-black wings circling the village. Their wingspan was awesome, making them wider than they were tall. One of the creatures descended on a corpse, claws first, and began ripping away at the clothing. It turned its repulsive, misshapen face to and fro, as if suspicious of intruders, before bending to feast on the flesh-covered meat it had exposed.

Raeka screamed as two of the creatures circled her. Keary's shoulders, his whole body was quaking. He could do nothing but helplessly watch as one of the creatures leapt on

Raeka, pinning her down, its head at her throat. Raeka's cry was instantly silenced. Keary backed away, his eyes huge and full of horror, knowing he was going to retch. The other creature came at her body; then two others landed and moved in. The first flared its wings and screamed in fury, but it was not intimidating enough to stop the others from lunging and fighting over the prized flesh and fresh blood.

Keary crawled backwards on hands and feet until he hit a tree, then used it for support to get to his feet. Whimpering, he took off, running on wobbly knees. He'd made it a few dozen paces when he began spewing vomit. He never stopped running.

* * * *

VIHLAE FOREST WAS, by turns, dim with the heavy shade of ancient trees then unmercifully bright from holes in the canopy. There was a close scent to the air, a combination of towering Blue Pine and earth, and humidity pressed heavy upon their skin.

The group rode until late afternoon, having stopped only once for a matter of minutes, long enough to stretch and pass water. By the waning of daylight, Ammey's body ached and her throat was parched, but no one was speaking, and she was determined that she would not be the first. She'd tried to hold herself upright and as far from Vincent as possible for as long as possible but fatigue had won out and during the last few hours she'd given up, leaned against him and they'd ridden together more as one than two.

"Here," Kidder spoke suddenly.

The exclamation startled her and she jumped slightly. Vincent reined in his horse, as did the others, and dismounted. He reached up to help Ammey down, but she swung her leg around the other side and dismounted on her own. Vincent felt a flash of irritation, especially as he saw the amusement in faces of the others. Ignoring them all, he stretched, reached for his canteen and walked into the oval patch of sunlight ahead.

Ammey followed, since all the others were gravitating toward the same area. "What are we doing?" she asked quietly. Their silence was unnerving.

"Waiting," Forzenay replied.

Stripe offered Ammey his canteen. She thanked him, and drank. Stripe threw Vincent a mildly reproachful look, which Vincent answered with a disdainful lift of one brow.

All of them stood around the perimeter of the light. Ammey was positioned between Forzenay and Kidder, and directly across from Vincent, who was staring, most unapologetically, at her.

Forzenay bowed his head and closed his eyes, and all the others did the same. Ammey followed their example until the feeling of soft, billowing fabric startled her and she looked up into a face of a lovely young woman.

"Welcome," the woman greeted with a warm smile.

Several other female voices extended a similar greeting and Ammey was astounded to see many standing amidst their small group. Where they had come from so suddenly, she could not fathom. Were they the infamous witches of Vihlae Forest? Without warning or instruction, the women

turned and began walking northward at a leisurely pace. Forzenay gestured for Ammey to follow, and he and the others fell into step behind her. Ammey was suddenly antsy with curiosity, but it wasn't the time to ask the scores of questions that sprang to her mind.

They were led into a neat camp, where many other women were waiting; all dressed similarly, in simple, robe-like garments of a light enough weight that they flowed and billowed slightly in the breeze. Ammey's eyes fell to a long table in the middle of the camp, which was set with food and drink.

"Welcome," a woman said as she emerged from the throng. Her long, dark hair was worn loose and fell past her knees.

"Milainah," Forzenay said reverently, bowing his head in greeting.

She smiled softly. "I was not certain we would see you again, Forzenay. I am glad of it."

"Your warning saved our lives. We are ever in your debt."

"There is no debt, but what you pay willingly and of your own accord," she returned.

"May I present—" Forzenay began.

"The daughter of the McKeaf," Milainah finished for him. Her gaze fell upon Ammey in pleased appraisal, and her large gray eyes focused, turning silver.

Ammey felt her breath catch and she lowered her head, suddenly awed and somewhat frightened of the magic here.

"You are burdened with guilt you have not earned," Milainah spoke in a haunting voice.

Ammey timidly looked back at Milainah again, and the silver gaze penetrated straight through to her core. "I share your fear and your grief for lost friends. Know that there will be more," she warned in a saddened, quiet voice.

It wasn't until Milainah looked away that Ammey could breathe again, and then the words she had spoken kept repeating themselves in her mind.

"You're in need of food, drink and rest," Milainah said, flicking her eyes over the group. "Please." She gestured to the table, then moved toward it and sat.

The others followed her example, all those but the women who began serving. Bowls of soapy water, clean water and cloths were brought around first to wash hands in, then came offerings of fruits, breads, fillets of fish and mixtures of grains, rice and nuts. It was simply prepared but delicious. The drink was unfamiliar to Ammey. It was golden and sweet, but with a pungent after-bite. It affected her senses immediately, making her relaxed and slightly dizzy.

As darkness fell, fires were lit around camp and countless starflit lanterns flickered to life. Ammey was astonished by the tiny creatures. They were similar to fireflies, only larger and infinitely more colorful. She'd heard talk of them and imagined them, but she'd never before seen them. Each lantern contained hundreds of starflits, and their color was brilliant. Some lanterns were a solid color, red, violet, blue, golden, green—others were varied.

She felt a soft kick beneath the table and looked sideways at Vincent, seated catty-corner from her. "Eat," he urged.

She looked away from him without reply, reached into her dish and placed a piece of fruit into her mouth. She didn't know what it was, but it was delicious. She savored it, trying to determine what the flavor was. Sweet, spicy, a bit tart—

Vincent frowned, and turned to Stripe to complain. "She's drinking and staring when she needs to be eating."

Stripe looked at Ammey. She did seem remarkably innocent and child-like, and he understood the inclination to protect her as such. But he could also still recall their first visit to the place. A corner of his mouth quirked. "She'll be fine."

Music played, pipes of some kind, and some of the women danced. They were fascinating. Even those that were working, serving others, seemed utterly happy to be doing so. Ammey had never witnessed such a peaceful contentment before. "What do you call them?" she asked Graybil, who was seated next to her.

"Seidh," he replied. "They are some of the most evolved of the race. Milainah, their leader, is the seidhkona."

The race, she pondered. The human race, or were they their own race? They looked human, but with a grace, sense of serenity and wisdom about them that seemed uncommon, if not unearthly.

Ammey looked at Graybil, wondering if he found them beautiful. He was not a classically handsome man, but there was strength in his square-jawed face and compassion in his blue-gray eyes. "Do they ever leave here? Do they ever marry?"

"Why? Thinking of joining them?" he teased.

She looked back at the dancers. It wasn't like any dance she'd ever seen or taken part in. "I don't think I have the right temperament," she said honestly.

He laughed. "I think you may be right about that."

* * * *

AFTER THE MEAL, Ammey was led to a pool to bathe.

"Everything you need is here," the young woman who was her guide explained, gesturing to bowls and baskets of soft fragrant soap solutions, implements and wraps for drying.

"And your lodge is near. I'll take you when you're ready."

"Thank you."

The young woman walked away and Ammey undressed and slipped into the water, braced for cold. It was tepid, however, and she relaxed and swam to the center of the pool. She floated, staring up at a black sky full of dancing stars, wondering where her father and brothers were. Were they looking up at the same patch of stars, wondering where she was? They had to be wondering why Zenon and Cael had not returned. Or had they already discovered the reason? If so, they would be distraught and full of fear regarding her safety. She closed her eyes in a moment of fervent prayer. Let them know I am safe and well. Please.

The soap was soft and slightly sticky, but its scent was pleasing. She lathered it all over, even into her hair then swam to rinse. When she stepped out of the water, it was reluctantly, out of sheer fatigue. She dried and then sat by the pool's edge. She cleaned her teeth with a smooth wooden instrument from one of the bowls and then worked the

tangles from her hair with a wide-tooth comb from a basket. She stared at the reflection of stars on the pool's surface until she no longer saw them, until she was lost inside her thoughts.

Julia. She longed for her. They'd spent a lifetime scheming, laughing, arguing, sharing secrets. And Cael. He'd been so alive. He'd been a tease, a favorite of the local young women. He could have had his choice of most any of them. He would have fallen in love. He would have been a wonderful husband and father. And Zenon—quiet, serious, loyal Zenon. She'd trusted him completely. Three friends dead in less than that many days. It was unthinkable. Cael had been laughing one moment, trying to cajole her from her gloom, and dead the next. How was it possible that a vibrant life could be so quickly extinguished? Where had he gone? And Julia—

She had not lost many loved ones in her lifetime. She'd lost her mother, but she'd been only five at the time, and her memories were few. Mostly, they were of her mother's face and her long, ebony hair, her low-pitched laughter and her dancing. Isabella Ayala McKeaf had loved to dance. The McKeaf's all danced, but the Celtic style, passed down through her father's line, was utterly different than Castilian. Her mother's dancing had been graceful, incorporating arms and hands, the entire upper body. The Celtic style the McKeaf's were famous for was mostly a matter of footwork, of rhythmic stomping. Her family had spent countless hours practicing, performing, and having a wonderful time. Ammey smiled wistfully, thinking of it.

The thought of Theresa, her only sister, suddenly sobered her. They'd lost her, too, though not to death. Theresa's betrayal had broken her father's heart. Lucas McKeaf wouldn't even speak his eldest daughter's name any longer. None of them did.

"Are you ready?" a voice spoke behind Ammey. The young guide was waiting patiently, a lantern full of blue starflits in her hand.

Ammey quickly got to her feet and went for her clothing. "Yes. Thank you. The bathing felt wonderful."

"There are three pools. The one you bathed in was the pool of contemplation."

"What are the others?"

"The pool of restoration and the pool of purification."

The guide led the way to a tent-like lodge, pulled back the flap and handed Ammey the lantern. "There is a gown inside. It is yours to keep."

"I thank you," Ammey said, sincerely moved by their gracious generosity.

"The giving is our pleasure. When you're ready to sleep, say so, and the starflits will put out their light." She backed up. "Rest well."

"Good night," Ammey returned. She stepped into the lodge and set the lantern next to a thick pallet. She piled her clothing and her wrap on the floor, then crawled onto the pallet and covered herself with the fur. It was soft and warm, and she was so tired. Her eyes drooped, but she watched the starflits until she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. "Sleep," she murmured, and their light went out.

* * * *

SHE WOKE ABRUPTLY and completely, although it was still dark. She sat up and looked around. It was almost as if someone had called her. Had they? She listened and heard nothing.

She slipped on the gown and stepped outside. Her gaze was drawn to a campfire and the seidh gathered around it. Large, colorful wisps floated around the group. It was enchantment of some kind, and Ammey stood mesmerized, watching it, until she realized she was supposed to join the circle.

She shook her head, wondering what had made her think such a thought. But there it was—the urging that she join the others. She took one tentative step, and then another. She was too uncertain to go forward, yet too compelled to remain where she was. She saw something out of the corner of her eye, and turned to see an auburn-haired woman standing nearby, watching her. The young woman gestured encouragingly, and Ammey followed her into the circle. She was led to a flat pillow and bid to sit.

Milainah watched the daughter of the McKeaf with unfathomable silver eyes. "You were named well," she began speaking after Ammey was seated. "Amaris."

Ammey was surprised to hear her given name spoken aloud.

"Child of the moon," Milainah said.

"Yes," Ammey murmured. That was the meaning of her name.

"All your life, you have been isolated by those who had your best interest at heart. You are to be afforded this no longer."

The ominous words chilled Ammey.

"You have embarked upon a journey that will change many lives," another woman spoke. Ammey had not noticed her before. She had long, white hair and pale eyes.

"Whose lives?" Ammey asked, puzzled by the message.

"That depends on the choices you make," Milainah replied.
"You must learn to trust yourself and the protectors that guide you."

Ammey wondered if she was referring to Forzenay.

A warm hand touched her arm and Ammey turned to face the auburn-haired woman who'd led her in. "There are men who have unleashed a dark force to aid their cause," she said, in a low, breathy voice. "This has changed everything."

"Our mission is balance," Milainah spoke from Ammey's opposite side.

Ammey turned to her, feeling dizzy and strange. How had she come around the fire so quickly? "Balance?"

"Yes. We beckon entities of light."

"You are highly favored, Amaris," someone said.

Ammey looked around the fire. The woman with white hair had spoken again.

The voices, like the colorful wisps that swirled and swayed around the fire, were making her disoriented. She was favored? "By whom?" she asked, trying to cling to rational thought.

"Selene, goddess of the moon," Milainah replied. "Know that. You will need it."

A pink wisp floated toward her and Ammey watched it, mesmerized by its beauty and the feeling of love and goodwill that emanated from it.

"What do you see?" Milainah asked quietly, gesturing palms-up as she looked about the flames of the fire.

"Wisps," Ammey replied said, uncertainly. "Of different colors."

"Is that all?" Milainah asked searchingly.

"What do you feel?" the white-haired woman spoke up.

"Warmth," Ammey said, trying to trust her instincts.

"Caring. Concern. What are they?"

"They are anyej, the newly departed," Milainah replied.

"You have many who seek to guide you," another woman said. "But they are new to their world and have much to learn."

Questions flooded Ammey's mind and she opened her mouth to speak, but Milainah spoke first. "You are wise to have questions, but I cannot provide answers for all that you seek to know."

There was such depth to Milainah, such mystery. Ammey sought to understand, but her mind seemed to be fading.

Milainah smiled a comforting smile, as if she understood Ammey's struggle. "It's time to wake."

Ammey's confusion was great. "Wake?"

Ammey jerked and opened her eyes. She was still in bed, under the fur, and a young woman was standing inside the

flap, apparently having just woken her. "They're waiting for you," she said.

Ammey blinked. "Who?"

"Forzenay and the others."

It was early, she could tell by the muted gray light outside the tent flap. "I was sleeping?" she muttered, still dazed from the dream.

"There's food and drink prepared, and you're to take the fur, for sleeping."

The woman left, even before Ammey could form the words to thank her. She rubbed her face, trying to wake fully and shake the strangeness of the dream. It took another few moments to determine the basis for the discomforture nagging her. She was wearing the gown.

* * * *

AMMEY CHANGED back into the leggings and tunic she'd worn the day before. They were Dane's, and she *had* worn them to get at her brothers, and to buy time. She'd thought they would send her back to her room to change into something appropriate. Cael had been right. He'd known it, too. She could still hear his laughter and see the devilish grin on his face. Ammey bowed her head and exhaled deeply, waiting for the pain in the center of her chest to let up.

* * * *

MILAINAH WAS NOWHERE around when they departed and none of the seidh escorted them out.

"How will we find the horses?" Ammey asked, as the six of them tromped through the dense forest.

"We can find our way out," Stripe replied. "Just not in."

"You will ride with me," Forzenay told Ammey. "I have something to discuss with you."

She'd noticed that he had been oddly silent this morning. They found the horses, and Ammey mounted first. Forzenay mounted behind her and they rode out in the lead position. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"Draven."

"Why?"

"That's where the men we have to kill are."

Ammey felt herself stiffen.

"That's what you have to be taught," he said, when it became clear she was not going to ask.

"To kill a man?"

"Yes."

She shook her head. "I'm no assassin."

They rode in silence awhile. "Julia Cator was your friend," Forzenay said carefully.

The statement took her by surprise and it took a moment to respond. "Since we were children."

"If one man had attacked her, instead of many, and you had been there, would you have tried to help?"

"Of course!"

"Would you have killed him if necessary?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation.

"What if someone attacked one of your brothers?"

"Which brother?" she asked facetiously.

He laughed.

"I see what you're trying to do," she said. "But those situations are not the same as assassinating a man."

"You're right," he agreed. "The situation you deem acceptable, coming to the defense of loved one, takes a life and saves a life. The men we're going after are responsible for the destruction of whole villages and the massacre of many. And they'll keep at it until we stop them."

She frowned as she considered his words.

Graybil glanced over at her, trying to judge her reaction.

"What would you want of me?" she asked quietly.

"These men are clever and careful, especially Tariq, one of the leaders. They only surround themselves with their own kind ... with the exception of women."

She swallowed. "Whores, you mean?" "Yes."

She felt her face grow warm. Was it necessary to establish she was not one? Surely not. Surely they did not think such a thing about the daughter of the McKeaf. Or had they heard about Theresa and assumed?

"You only need to pose as one, to get into his lodge," Forzenay said.

"So I can kill him?" It was an absurd contention.

"His deeds have doomed him. A poison will kill him. Your only function will be to put it into his drink."

"Oh, is that all?" she asked caustically.

"No, that's not all," Vincent spoke up. He'd caught up and was riding to their side. "You have to know a half dozen other ways to kill a man, for whatever goes wrong."

"Nothing will go wrong," Forzenay retorted, scowling at Vincent.

"Something always goes wrong," Vincent disagreed.

"She should agree to joining us," Stripe said. "We cannot force her into it."

"I agree," Kidder spoke up.

"As do I," Graybil said. "She should know what we know and then she should have the choice. If she doesn't want to do it, I'll return her to the Forge."

"She's not to go back to the Forge," Forzenay stated. "Not yet."

She turned her head to the side, disturbed by his proclamation. "Why not?"

He didn't reply for a moment. "Your father and brothers are in charge of a military operation that will fail without them."

"And I'm a distraction," she murmured, recalling her father's admonition.

"Because they care, not because of anything you've done wrong," Forzenay said quietly. "I know it's a sacrifice, Ammey McKeaf. One of many you'll be called upon to make."

"Did Milainah say I was to help?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"She said you would help."

It was Ammey's guess that the seidhkona had said a great deal more than that. "Is Milainah ... human? Mortal?"

"Yes."

"How does she know what she knows?"

"They are the called. They give their lives to the white art of divination. That's all I know."

* * * *

"WE'LL KEEP it simple," Vincent said, his golden-brown eyes boring into Ammey's. "But even simple is not easy. It is not easy to kill a man. Ever."

She nodded, certain that was true.

"Bear in mind, you'll only use these techniques if you're defending your life, or possibly someone else's." He pulled up her hand. "Use the heel of your hand," he said, tapping it brusquely. "Use all your force, straight out, one blow, hit here," he instructed, stretching her arm out and placing her hand against his throat. "Precisely here."

"How is she going to practice this technique?" Graybil teased, to a general laugh.

Vincent didn't crack a smile or look away from Ammey. "Why not my fist?" she asked.

"Fingers break. Now, go through the motion slowly, beginning with seeing your enemy fall in your mind. Before you ever move, you must see it; want it."

She imagined the shadowy face of Julia's attacker just before he pounced. Yes, she could do this.

"It must be one blow, and they must never see it coming," Vincent said, backing up. "Step out and drive all the force in your body into that spot, crush his windpipe."

Her concentration was complete as she stepped forward, slicing through the air with an involuntary, primal cry.

"Good," Vincent said. "Again."

Forzenay crossed his arms, impressed.

She went through the motion, again and again. She was killing a man. She was saving her friend. She could do this.

"From the side," Vincent said, moving next to her. "Use your elbow or the palm of your hand. Same target. Like this," he demonstrated in slow motion. "This is not a position of great advantage, but it can work. Try it."

Graybil nodded slowly, impressed that she was serious about training. Rather than challenging or resisting, she was listening and using her full effort. "Knees," he spoke up. "If you just need to incapacitate."

Vincent shrugged, willing to give it a two-minute lesson. "Kick sideways, like this, directly at the knee."

Kidder looked over at Forzenay, who was finishing the last of his meal. "What did you learn from the seidh that you haven't shared yet?"

Graybil and Stripe turned their attention to Forzenay, anxious to hear the reply.

Forzenay brushed off his hands, buying a moment. He'd known they would ask. They knew each other too well for concealing secrets. "It may not be Corin," he began.

Stripe looked around at the others and was gratified to see they looked as shocked as he felt.

"Or, perhaps I should say Corin may not be fully in charge," Forzenay clarified. "Whomever is in league with the dark force is from Bellux-Abry."

"What kind of dark force are we talking about?" Stripe asked.

"FROM BEHIND," Vincent said as he continued the lesson, oblivious to the conversation the others were engaged in. "If you hit—" he looked over at the others. "Kidder," he called.

Kidder held up a finger. "Don't explain this without me," he said to Forzenay. He got to his feet and went to Vincent. "What?"

"Turn around," Vincent ordered. "We need to kill you."

"Anything to oblige," Kidder said pleasantly. He turned.

"Here," Vincent said, pointing to the base of Kidder's skull.

"Hit here hard enough and you will kill a man."

"Am I done?" Kidder asked.

"Use the palm," Vincent said, ignoring Kidder.

Ammey went through the motion slowly.

"Again."

She did it again.

"No, slightly lower. Here," he said, taking her hand and placing it in the precise spot.

"Now am I done?" Kidder asked.

"Fine, you're done. I do apologize for taking you away from whatever vitally important activity you were involved in."

Kidder threw up a hand as he strode back to the others. "Quite alright. Carry on."

Vincent turned back to Ammey and noticed she was covered in a fine sheen of perspiration. It glistened on her, and made her tunic stick to her skin. Her breathing was labored, her pulse visible in the hollow of her throat. "Do you want to rest for a bit?"

"No." She put her hands on her hips, waiting for more instruction.

How had he not fixated on her body before? Suddenly, it was all he could see. He blew out a breath and looked away. "Perhaps we're done for now." He had been planning to mention the most sensitive areas to hit or kick or a man, but that didn't seem wise at the moment.

Forzenay got to his feet. "Let's walk a bit," he said quietly.

Stripe, Kidder and Graybil got up and followed him, anxious to learn what he knew.

"What if someone grabs and holds me?" Ammey asked Vincent.

"That's a good question," Vincent conceded as he watched the others walking away. It left them alone. It left her at his mercy. "If I come at you this way—"

He came at her abruptly and she lifted her arms in defense.

He grabbed her wrists and yanked her to him. "You're mine."

She tried to pull and wrest herself free, to no avail. "I could kick you," she threatened.

"And would you announce it first?"

She narrowed her eyes and considered lifting her knee into his groin.

"Consider that I could easily throw you down, get on top of you and do whatever I wanted. So could anyone. Stop struggling," he ordered.

She frowned up at him.

"Frown all you want. I'm teaching you a lesson here."

"What lesson?"

"More than one, actually. One is, I'm stronger. Men are stronger."

"Two?" she asked in a bored tone.

"You're very beautiful."

He had not given her the least bit of positive attention before, much less paid her a compliment. Her face registered surprise, then heat, and she looked away from him.

"Desirable," Vincent added. "Men will want you."

He was only saying this to embarrass her. It was infuriating. "Is there a three coming?"

"Accept those two premises, and I'll teach you how to get out of this."

"Fine, I accept them," she said flippantly.

"You have to mean it."

She looked at him, and determined he was being serious and earnest. He was keeping her utterly off balance, challenging then seducing, angering and then caring. It made her feel strange and vulnerable. "Fine. You're stronger. I know that. I have five older brothers," she reminded him.

"I'm stronger ... and?"

She swallowed. "And men will—" She closed her eyes. This was humiliating. Her eyes flew back open at him, startling him with their fire and color. He'd never seen greener eyes. "Can we continue with the lesson?" she asked impatiently. "You have made your point."

"Men will what?" he insisted.

"Desire me," she said, looking away from him.

"No, Ammey, it's more that that. They'll want you. They'll want to take you. Do you understand?"

"Yes!"

"Then twist inwards, hard."

She did and he lost his grip. It was odd to be free of him. She could still feel his hands around her wrists.

"Good," he said. He came at her, and they went through the motion again. This time she shook him easily and quickly. She smiled.

"That only buys you a moment," he said harshly. "Don't be too pleased with yourself."

* * * *

"REMBEMBER THE OUTPOST of Sheurvin?" Forzenay asked.

Stripe clenched his fists remembering.

Kidder sniffed and shook his head. "You don't forget a sight such as that."

"What about it?" Graybil asked. "Wild dogs had gotten there, or hyenas."

"It may have been something else," Forzenay said.

"What?"

"Demons."

"Demons," Stripe repeated. "The seidhkona said that?"

"Sheurvin was not the first place where the bodies of the dead and dying was consumed," Forzenay said.

"Did the seidhkona say it was demons?" Graybil pushed. "Yes."

Kidder squatted, suddenly overwhelmed by the news. "How are we supposed to fight demons?"

Forzenay shook his head. "We're not. It is the one that summoned the dark force who must be stopped. Only when he's dead is the alliance broken. Only then can the demons be exiled back to the underworld. But not by us. No human force can combat demons."

"So, we go forward with our plan?" Stripe asked. "Kill Gilley and Tariq?"

"Gilley the elder and younger," Forzenay said. "The elder is more culpable than we thought."

"Would it not be better to abduct one of them and torture the truth from them?" Graybil posed. "Find out who their leaders are? Who summoned the dark force?"

"They won't know," Forzenay replied.

Kidder stood back up. "Were you foretold how events will turn out?"

Forzenay shook his head. "No. There are too many variables, but there is hope. There is a path and one who must take it."

The three looked at him, wondering what he was not saying.

"Do you know who?" Stripe asked.

Forzenay avoided looking at any of them.

"Is it someone we know?" Kidder spoke up.

"Is it one of us?" Graybil asked.

"It is not one of our five," Forzenay said carefully.

"Although our success in Draven is crucial."

"So, perhaps, Gilley or Tariq is the one who summoned the dark force," Graybil said. "Isn't that possible?"

"No," Forzenay replied bluntly. He turned to go. "And we should go. We should get to Draven as soon as possible."

CHAPTER 3: Draven

MANY OF THE BUILDINGS in Draven looked to be from the previous century. It seemed queer that the streets of the town were as neat as they were, given the crumbling decay that lined many of them. Perhaps the wind kept it swept clean of debris, Ammey considered. It was close enough to the western coast that the sea breeze was strong and frequent.

She was both relieved and distressed to arrive. It had taken four days of hard riding, and every mile had come with instruction of some kind, mostly about taking life in the quickest, most efficient manner. Some of the lessons, however, had been about the men they were shadowing, specifically about the atrocities they had planned and committed. There had been many, and they were as brutal as they were senseless. She'd listened and had begun to understand the necessity of removing these men from existence. She understood it, which didn't necessarily mean she could do it.

Because she could wrestle Graybil to the ground in less than a minute and deliver a pretend deathblow to his heart, did not mean she could deliver an actual deathblow to a stranger, no matter how terrible a person she knew him to be. She could manage pretend-killing any of the Five, but could she truly take a life when it counted? And if she couldn't, how at risk was she putting the others?

She no longer dwelt on the fact she was in the company of Azulland's most feared assassins, indeed, that she was about

to become one. These were real men who cared about one another deeply, who had a sense of pride, but also of humor. It was strange how quickly she'd come to care about them, especially given that they were not open to sharing personal information. She knew how they slept, who snored, who ate what, and so forth, but she didn't know if they had families, if they'd ever wanted a different sort of life, if they'd ever been in love. The bonds they'd forged, she supposed, came from being together as closely as they were forced to be together and from sharing a highly dangerous, utterly secret mission.

It frequently occurred to her how little about her daily life felt real anymore, not in the way it had before. It was as if she'd become less than herself, or perhaps someone else altogether. She spent her waking hours riding and training, vaguely aware that every step and every hour took her further and further away from her home and family. Often, that alone felt real and pressing.

She missed her father and brothers. She missed her home. The missing had become a constant, inescapable ache, but she could and would endure it. Not only because no one had offered her a choice, but because, for the first time in her life, she was a small part of an important effort. What had the seidhkona told her? She would help to change lives. They'd also said she was no longer to be protected by her family. Why was the question that plagued her mind. Was it punitive, because she was a distraction, or preventative, because something was destined to happen to them?

Her father and brothers had always seemed invincible to her, but no one was invincible. The fact that they were

considered some of the greatest military leaders in the country may well have made them targets. Was some plot being hatched this very moment to end their lives? Innocents like Julia, Zenon and Cael, like the villagers of Wydenyl, were being targeted, or perhaps callously selected at random. Would it not make more sense to seek out the mighty that could ultimately subdue your cause? It did, and that realization both frightened her and strengthened her resolve.

* * * *

RIDING SLIGHTLY APART from one another, the Five men took back streets to the small inn they lodged in when in Draven. They had established connections here that were vital to the success of their mission, and Xavier Yuralis, the owner of the inn, was the most valued.

Ammey and Vincent were in last position. They passed the shop of a leather dresser, a cooper and a brewery, and a combination of pungent odors permeated the air.

"Ah, to be in town again," Vincent said drolly. "Have you been here before?"

"No."

A strand of her hair blew in his face and he brushed it away. He couldn't help smelling it, though. Whatever the seidh had given her to wash with smelled fresh and pleasing. He'd never realized the power of scent before her. "There are some interesting shops on the main road," he offered. "They sell silks, parchments, imports, glassware."

"Will we have much time to shop?" she teased.

He grinned and reined in his mount to allow a woman chasing her pig by. "Where have you been, outside of the Forge?" he asked as they turned onto a side road.

"I've been to Qaddys and I've been to Cala."

"I've never been to Cala," he replied. "Is it pleasant?"

He rarely asked questions or initiated normal conversation. It seemed a shame that this particular question could not be answered with complete honesty. She'd had a miserable time in Cala, they all had, but she would not go into that painful bit of family history here and now, or probably ever. Besides, the question had been regarding the place, not her experience. "The streets are paved and the buildings are tall. Many of them are white from the blasting of sun and sand and time, I suppose."

"That's why they call it the white city," he mused. "I assumed it was the white sand."

"It is. That, too. And they have artisans there that make glass objects. They're so beautiful. That's what I think of, white and glass," and Theresa, dishonor and betrayal, "—and the blue of the sea. It's so blue there."

"Here we are," he said, nodding at the nondescript inn.

The position of the sun cast the building in shadow, but it struck her as small and seedy. Forzenay's horse was not tied to the hitching rail. Neither were the others. "Where are the horses?"

"Around back," Vincent replied as he dismounted. "We try never to draw attention to ourselves." Ammey had already kicked her leg over the horse's head and was prepared to jump down. Vincent held his hands up to assist her and this

time she allowed it. She made contact with his shoulders at the same moment his hands slipped around her waist and, in that instant, it occurred to both of them that it was a mistake. There was white energy between them, an attraction that was already making it more natural to pair up than be apart. Obviously, this was a condition to be fought and subdued.

They heard footsteps and turned to see Stripe and Kidder, followed by Forzenay and Graybil who were discussing something in low voices. Forzenay looked up and saw Vincent and Ammey. "Let's go."

* * * *

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?" Xavier bellowed when he saw them enter. "Frolicking with the devil again? And who's she?"

Ammey couldn't see; the interior of the inn was too dark.

"Here," Kidder said, putting one hand on her back and one on her arm and leading her forward. "It's dark, I know."

"A friend," Forzenay replied. "We need food and drink, old man."

"Of course you do." Xavier began serving mugs of ale, pounding each on the counter top as it was filled, sloshing some out in the process. "This friend have a name?"

"You may call her ... Jade," Forzenay said slowly, inspired by her wild green eyes. "The Lady Jade." He picked up a mug and drank.

Ammey tried not to react. Was she to claim a different name now? The low-ceilinged room was beginning to come into focus; perhaps many things were. The inn was constructed simply of all dark wood. There were some fifteen

or so well worn, deeply scarred sets of table and chairs for customers, but only one customer was present now. Forzenay and the others were casually standing around, drinking, unbothered by the presence of the man.

Stripe came to her with a full mug in hand. "Here," he offered.

She accepted it with thanks and brought it to her lips. The first sip was tangy, then bitter, and she wondered if she could drink it. She noticed the others downing theirs as if it were water or wine.

"So, where have you been?" Xavier asked again.

Xavier was a plain man with stringy black hair. Normal build, normal height. There was nothing remarkable about him, nothing that would make anyone recall his features an hour after meeting him, although he did have a look about him that suggested intelligence or, at the very least, good common sense.

"Wydenyl," Forzenay replied.

"So you warned them, did you?"

A middle-aged woman appeared in the door. Her face seemed too youthful and attractive for her gray hair. "There you are," she greeted warmly. "I thought I heard your voices. Where have you been? Our friends are about to depart."

"Depart?" Vincent blurted.

"That's what we hear when we're not supposed to be hearing," Xavier concurred. "They need food," he said, directing it to his wife.

"I have ox tail soup," she announced.

"Good," Stripe replied. "That sounds good."

"Ulima, this is Ammey," Forzenay said.

"Oh, so she gets an introduction," Xavier groused. "What was all that about Lady Jade?"

"I said you could *call her* that," Forzenay replied, passing his mug back for a refill. "I didn't say it was her name."

Xavier snarled at him, but refilled the mug. "Aren't you the amusing one?"

Ulima looked over and assessed Ammey. "You're far too pretty to be traveling with this lot, my girl," she remarked. "How did that come about?"

"What do you mean depart?" Graybil spoke up, anxious to get back to the point.

"What do you hear?" Vincent pushed.

Ulima shrugged. "Business first. We'll talk later," she said to Ammey. Then she turned and hurried off to get soup and bread served.

She was plainspoken, with remarkable energy, and Ammey knew at once she'd like her.

"They seem full of themselves," Xavier said, leaning forward onto the sticky counter.

"That's hardly a new development," Kidder replied.

"There is a new development," the man at the table said.

"Something about to happen at Shilbridge, a meeting of some kind."

"When?" Graybil asked, moving closer to the old man.

Ammey walked further in the room and rested against the bar. The man speaking, the lone customer, had white hair on his head and grizzled face. He was thin but his jowls were

loose. He had a kind looking face with sad eyes, as if he'd seen great sorrow in his life.

"Soon," he said. "There's been talk about them clearing out on the morrow."

Forzenay frowned into his mug of dark ale. He'd been warned their timing had to be perfect. *Take not longer than four days to get to Draven*. That's what the seidh had told him, and they'd done it. He knew the warnings. He would not forget them and he would not fail to heed them.

"Who's still here?" Kidder asked.

"The men who rode out for Wydenyl returned yesterday,"
Xavier replied. "Then there's Gilley, Luttaz, Tariq, of course—"
"Good," Forzenay said. It was Tariq that had to die tonight.

* * * *

THE FOOD REVIVED THE SMALL BAND, and afterwards, they sat back, satiated.

"Are you as good with a sword as the rest of your family?" Forzenay asked Ammey.

"They would say no," she replied.

Kidder grinned. "All men? I would suppose so."

"They would say no," she repeated, putting an entirely different emphasis on it.

"The lady has supreme confidence," Vincent remarked, picking up his mug and draining the last of it.

"Perhaps she'd provide us a demonstration," Graybil suggested. "I'm always looking for pointers from masters."

There were smiles all around and a few chuckles, Ammey's among them. Being teased was certainly not a new experience for her. "It's the least I can do," she replied.

Forzenay caught Stripe's eye and conveyed a silent message. He'd introduced the topic for a reason; he wanted Ammey kept busy and focused on something other that what was to happen.

"Xavier has just the place for a match," Stripe said. "But who would spar with such a worthy opponent?"

"Oh, I would," Vincent replied smoothly.

"Excellent!" Kidder said. "Vincent has supreme confidence of his own. He could almost always use a little dose of humility."

Graybil chuckled and nodded in agreement.

"Always good to know who your friends are," Vincent replied dryly.

"To it, then," Stripe said, getting up.

There was a scraping of chairs as most everyone rose. Forzenay watched his band lead Ammey off, genuinely enthused about the entertainment to come, then sat back down and turned his full attention on Xavier.

"What's the plan?" Xavier asked, when the others had gone into the adjoining room.

"She's got to be put in front of Tariq," Forzenay said. "But not in an obvious manner. He has to believe it's his idea."

Xavier rubbed his chin. "Well, we know where he'll be, and we know he'll be interested."

Forzenay nodded. "And she knows what to do once she gets him alone."

"So it's only the introduction that needs arranging?" "Yes."

Xavier pondered the matter. "You're sure she's up to what needs doing?"

"She has strength," Forzenay replied thoughtfully. "More than she knows."

"But to kill a man-"

"Not a man, an arranger of death," Forzenay interrupted. "She knows of the massacres he's planned, the rapes he's committed, the torture he condones."

"I hope you're right," Xavier said. "He's the one. Not that another won't rise to fill his place, mind you."

"And when he does," Forzenay replied grimly. "—we'll take care of him, too."

* * * *

"WHOSE BLADE WOULD YOU LIKE, my lady?" Graybil asked, offering his.

Stripe withdrew his from his sheath, as did Kidder, holding them out for her inspection.

She looked over each; then took Stripe's in hand. She turned and slashed through the air, testing its weight and balance.

"I'm intimidated, already," Kidder said. He pursed his lips to keep from smiling.

"Oh, the sarcasm of men," she said lightly. "Let's see how long you can maintain it."

Stripe laughed out loud. "Indeed!"

"Will it do, then?" Kidder asked.

"It will do," she said, walking further into the large room, toward Vincent who was waiting patiently, arms crossed.

"I feel rather honored," Stripe teased.

"As well you should," Graybil joined in, slipping his sword back in its sheath.

"Are you ready?" Ammey asked Vincent.

He withdrew his sword with a lazy smile. "Why not?"

She assumed her stance, placing her feet at right angles to one another, her right toe pointed at him, legs slightly bent. Her sword-hand was level with her right breast, her elbow a hand's length from her body, the blade following the line of her elbow. She raised her left arm in a graceful arch. "En Garde."

"You sure that's not too heavy for you?" he asked, as he extended his blade at her.

She swatted it away. "I'm perfectly comfortable, thank you."

His first thrust was almost playful, and she parried without much effort. Hers was less playful, and he was forced to step back.

Kidder smiled broadly.

Graybil was silently calculating how long it would take Vincent to get serious. Less than a minute was his guess.

He was right. Metal clashed in a steady cadence as the pair sallied back and forth across the stone floor.

Ammey sidestepped a lunge, whirled around and initiated her own counter attack, resulting in the first hit.

"Touche," Vincent admitted, no longer smiling.

"Who wants to be next?" Stripe asked, under his breath.

"Not I," Kidder replied quickly.

* * * *

FORZENAY JOINED them a short time later. "What's the score?"

"He's got one hit to her three," Kidder said jovially.

"She's spent her life sparring with her elder brothers, all masters of the sword," Forzenay said.

"It shows," Graybil remarked.

"I've seen the brothers McKeaf in action," Stripe said. "At the games."

"Oh?"

"The rings, jousting, there's very little they can be beat at."

Forzenay watched as Ammey advanced on Vincent. Vincent maneuvered a smooth cut over, then deftly turned and swung around, hoping to lunge and score his second hit, but she was too fast, and he found the blade poised in front of his chest.

"Tou-che," Kidder said under his breath.

"Could I beg your attention," Forzenay spoke up, glad to spare Vincent from any more doses of humility. "We have important matters to discuss."

Vincent and Ammey broke apart, both sweating and breathing hard. They considered one another in silence for a few moments and then he bowed his head. "You are a superior swordswoman, my lady."

"I've had some training," she said, graciously. "Beginning at age three, they tell me."

THE GROUP, including Xavier, gathered around a large table to discuss the events of the evening. "As you all know, our primary target is Tariq," Forzenay began.

"So we offer our golden girl as bait," Vincent said darkly. He didn't care for the idea and he did not particularly care who knew it. "How can we be sure he'll take it?"

Graybil looked at Ammey, then at Vincent. "You can't be serious."

Vincent scowled at his friend, and Graybil could not help but smile in return. He'd never seen Vincent so needled. Before now, he'd thought of him as unflappable.

"This has got to a pleasant conversation for her to endure," Kidder rejoined.

"Vincent," Forzenay said. "Women are his only weakness. You know that. He trusts no man, except his innermost circle. He surrounds himself with guards, except when in the presence of a female. He has someone prepare all his food, then he has a taster make certain it's free of poison."

"We could ambush them," Vincent suggested.

"Yes, we could," Forzenay replied patiently. "But the chances of injury are great, and we still have much to accomplish. This is the best plan for success. The risks are low, and I believe she can do it."

"And if she's willing—" Kidder said quietly.

Vincent looked away. The muscle working in his jaw was the only thing that betrayed his agitation.

Ammey couldn't bring herself to speak up. She was willing to try, but that's all she could promise. Was it enough? Was it

worth pledging? Besides, Vincent's concern had taken her by surprise. She wasn't sure what to make of it, or the feelings she was experiencing. She had fought for some measure of respect and independence her entire life, but that was at home with her kith and kin. This was an entirely different situation.

"If the operation goes according to plan," Stripe began, "Tariq will be dead and the rest will jump into high alert. They'll know we're on them."

"Which is why we should take them all," Graybil said vehemently, his blue-gray eyes shining. "We could make a real difference, deliver a real blow ... tonight."

"I agree," Stripe spoke up.

Kidder was nodding. "It's time to strike back."

Forzenay began thinking logistics. "Ammey takes Tariq," he said softly. "Someone's got to cover her."

"I will," Vincent volunteered.

"Then we need two on Gilley the younger. He's the next most important target. And he's careful."

"We'll do it," Kidder said, pointing at Graybil, who concurred with a firm nod.

"The elder's a drunk," Xavier spoke up. "I can take care of him."

"Late," Forzenay replied. "He's always one of the last to leave the alehouse."

"If he leaves," Xavier added.

"That leaves Luttax—"

"And all the others," Vincent said.

"We can do it," Graybil said. "Forzenay acts as the eye and we take them all. Then we move on to Shilbridge, before anyone there is alerted to the situation."

"Yes, tonight," Kidder agreed. "And we watch from there. If we've missed anyone, we can get them there, before they reach the others."

"It's bold," Forzenay said. "But perhaps it's time for bold." He looked around the table, meeting each and every eye. There was nothing but agreement and resolve from his men. Ammey was nervous and reticent, but she would try. And she was a McKeaf.

* * * *

FORZENAY, XAVIER, AMMEY AND VINCENT headed out when daylight was nearly gone, and positioned themselves in a dark alley near the alehouse. Forzenay watched the street. The others pressed themselves against the cool, dampish stone of a building that housed the mason's guild.

Ammey had been given clothing that blended in, yet displayed her assets well. Her cotehardie was tight fitting, and the neckline of the overgown began near the shoulders and plunged. The ensemble drew one's eye over the flawless skin of her neck and shoulders, to the enticing bulge of her breasts. These were Vincent's thoughts as he studied her. From his position behind her, he could tell she was nervous. He could tell by her breathing and by the pulse in the well of her throat. Her hair was pulled back loosely, but the breeze had loosened a strand that blew against her cheek. He had to

restrain himself from reaching for it and tucking it behind her ear.

"The advantage here," Forzenay began, "—is that Tariq doesn't vary his routine. He's arrogant that way."

Ammey toyed with the small, specially sewn fold in her gown that contained the tiny vial of poison.

"It's fine," Vincent whispered. "It's safe."

She withdrew her hand but did not look at him.

"Here they come," Forzenay announced quietly as he watched Tariq and four of his men meandering down the street on the way into their favorite alehouse. He suspected they had already been drinking. "Go."

Vincent handed over the small cask of wine Ammey would carry. She took hold of it and followed Xavier out into the street. Each of them carried a cask, as if they'd just come from the vintner's down the street.

Vincent stepped closer to Forzenay so he could watch the interaction, if there was any. Ammey was lovely, no doubt, but not every man was attracted to every woman. Perhaps Tariq would not be attracted to her particular beauty.

Their timing was perfect; Forzenay could feel it in his gut. He popped his knuckles without realizing it as he watched Tariq. His focus was so complete; it seemed to slow the action. He saw Tariq and the others react as they spotted Ammey from the opposite side of the street. Tariq immediately slowed his pace and then stopped. "I knew it," Forzenay whispered.

Vincent grimaced. The bastard was interested. He loathed everything about Tariq—his greasy black hair and his

elaborate goatee, his manner of movement, his beady eyes, everything. He felt helpless as Tariq spoke briefly to one of his men, who then hurried after Xavier. He fought back a dull panic at the invisible net that was closing around Ammey. She wasn't ready for this yet. She was too innocent, too soft.

"A trap within a trap within a trap," Forzenay muttered, as he watched Tariq's emissary initiate a discussion with Xavier.

Vincent's eyes were on Tariq as he watching the ongoing discussion. The greasy-haired man was frowning, impatient, and after several moments, he sent another of his men to join the conversation, or was it a bargaining session? Tariq then walked on, going directly into the alehouse without so much as a glance backwards.

Forzenay felt the first wave of doubt. Had the plan just disintegrated before his eyes? Tariq's emissaries had obviously concluded their business with Xavier, because they were going their separate ways. Had an arrangement been made? Had there been an exchange of money? If so, he'd missed it.

* * * *

"THE STROKE OF TEN, by the alehouse," Xavier reported. He flung the coins he'd been paid with on the table. "I told them her name was Jade, that she was my niece, a good girl, a virtuous girl. 'His favorite kind,' one of them said."

"That's our timeline, then," Graybil said.

"We'd best go locate our man," Kidder suggested.

"Wait," Ulima called, as she walked into the room carrying a tray with small glasses filled with a green liquid in them. "Tradition."

"We wouldn't have left without it," Stripe said, as he took the first glass.

The rest were handed out and held up.

"To what needs to be done," Kidder said.

The toast echoed around the room. Ammey joined in, thinking it wasn't a bad motto. The drink was strange and strong. After a sip, and finding it not exactly to her taste, she downed it in one gulp, glad that there wasn't much of it. Then it hit, knocking her back a step. She was aware of the sudden burst of laughter, and of the strong arms around her. They were Forzenay's who'd apparently been expecting the reaction.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

She took a moment to determine whether she was or not. "I think so."

"It's that first kick that gets you," Graybil said with a smile and a wink.

Forzenay let go of her, and she remained upright.

"But it's tradition," Ulima added. "And so is success," she said with a meaningful nod. She walked to Ammey and placed strong hands on the girl's shoulders. "You'll do fine. You'll do what needs doing."

Vincent set his glass down. "I'm going." He looked at Ammey. "I'll be watching."

She watched him walk by, then listened to his retreating footsteps. He hadn't said where he would be or how he would be watching, but she didn't doubt that he would.

"Us, too," Kidder seconded. "Going, not watching," he clarified with a warm smile. "We'll see you later," he said, again to Ammey.

She nodded in return, grateful for the support she felt.

Graybil patted her shoulder, and the two left to locate Gilley the younger. Xavier and Ulima retired into the kitchen, to give the others a moment of privacy.

"I'm the eyes," Forzenay said. "So, I'll see," he said softly. "Believe in yourself, believe in your mission, and believe we won't let anything happen to you."

Stripe hefted the hilt of his sword. "Want this for backup?" he teased.

"Could I?" she teased right back.

Forzenay and Stripe left and she felt very alone, hoping above all else that she wouldn't let them down.

* * * *

XAVIER LEFT HER outside the alehouse at the appointed time with a meaningful nod; then disappeared inside. He would remain until Gilley the elder was dead. A short time later, Tariq appeared. "Jade?"

She blinked, momentarily surprised by the still unfamiliar name. "Yes." The word came out young sounding and breathy. Of course, Jade would have been nervous, too. Up close, she noticed his skin was pockmarked.

"You're so lovely," he said, raking her over with his dark eyes. "I understand you're willing to spend some time with me." He noted the fleeting confusion in her flushed face, and determined her uncle had not been exactly forthright with her. He offered his arm and she took it reluctantly.

"Are we going inside?" she asked.

He spent a moment reveling in her beauty, naiveté and in the sound of her voice. It was soft with a pleasing pitch. He loathed high pitch voices, and had been known to be exceedingly rough on women who possessed them. "No, this way," he replied, leading her on.

She resisted slightly. "Does my uncle—"
"Yes, my dear. He knows. It's all arranged."

* * * *

TARIQ OPENED THE DOOR for her, and she stepped into a room lit only by the dying fire in the hearth. He shut and locked the door behind her, then went to light a few candles. "There's not much to be had in this town in the way of decent accommodations," he said.

"What is it you want?" she asked, nervously.

He looked over at her and held out a hand, beckoning her in. "Your company, my dear."

She didn't move.

"Don't be afraid," he urged, coming back toward her.

She glanced around the cluttered room, puzzled by the odd, salty smell. Her eyes came to rest on the unmade bed. "What does that mean? My company?"

"What are you so frightened of?" he asked softly, pushing the hair back from one side of her face. "You're trembling."

She looked at him, allowing him to glimpse the true fear she felt. "I'm no whore," she pleaded.

"I know you're not," he assured her. "Nor am I interested in such. They carry diseases." His gaze dropped to her soft, pink lips. They were moist; she'd obviously just wetted them. Her chest was heaving; he could see her shaking. It was delicious, and a sharp thrill pulsed through him. "Have you ever been with a man?" he asked softly.

She took a step backwards, away from him, but he reached out and grabbed hold of her shoulders.

"It's alright," he cooed. "I know you're frightened, but you needn't be. It's very pleasurable."

She tried pulling from his grip, but he tightened his hold. "No, I ... can't," she whimpered.

"Relax," he coaxed. "Here, let's take this off," he said as he pulled the cloak from around her. "We'll have some wine."

"I don't mind serving you, or t-talking—" she stammered, talking quickly.

He smiled.

"I'm c-cold," she blurted.

"Then I'll build up the fire," he said patiently. She didn't fool him. More than anything, she wanted to bolt for the door, but he wasn't about to let that happen. "You pour the wine." He pointed her in the right direction.

She glanced sideways, toward the door.

"Go on," he insisted.

She did, walking slowly, hesitantly. It was almost too easy. He walked to the hearth and bent to add kindling, and she poured the deep red wine. When his full attention was on stoking the fire, she reached into her pocket for the vial of poison, and emptied it into one of the glasses by feel, keeping her eyes on him. Not even bothering to restop the empty vial, she tried to slip it back into the fold, just as she practiced a hundred times today, but she missed and it fell. She jerked her leg forward, giving it a path to slide down, and it hit the ground with a light clink. She held her breath.

He turned back to her. "Come," he urged, wiping off his hands.

She let out a shaky breath. He hadn't noticed the sound, but how foolish and careless could she be? And when everything was at stake. She picked up the glasses, walked to him and offered the full glass with a trembling hand.

He looked at the glass she offered, then at the not quite half-full glass in her other hand, and reached for it. "I'll take that one."

It was just as Forzenay had predicted. She grudgingly held out the glass he'd indicated, and then cupped the other in her hand.

"Drink," he said. "It's quite good."

She lifted it to her mouth and drank.

He watched, intrigued and eager to get on top of his prize. She was spectacular. He sipped his own wine. "Shall we sit?" he asked, motioning to the settee, anxious to put her at ease.

She acquiesced and he sat beside her, turning to face her. She dropped her eyes and drank some more. He smiled. At this rate, he'd have much less of a struggle. "How is it?"

"It's good," she replied shyly.

He sipped his merely to keep her drinking. He'd had enough to drink this evening and he didn't want to dull his senses. "Tell me about yourself. How old are you?"

How young could she pass for? "Nearly eighteen," she replied.

He smiled. "That's what I thought. Old enough to be married. You must have many a man sniffing around."

Hers eyes widened momentarily, then she averted them.

He nearly laughed; he was enjoying himself so. Instead, he leaned close and sniffed at her. She smelled clean and pure, intoxicating really. He couldn't wait to taste her skin, but she'd withdrawn from him, as much as was possible on the small settee. He chuckled and leaned back again, happy to play cat and mouse for a while. "Do you dance?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps you'd dance for me," he suggested. Her smile was one of relief, that *that's* all he wanted. It was highly amusing.

She set down her glass and got up, which was better. She felt more in control on her feet. Hopefully, she would entertain and he would drink. She wasn't sure how much wine he had to consume for the poison to work, but he hadn't had much yet.

"Wait," he said, getting up. "There's music." He walked to the double window, removed the bar that was locking it, and opened one side. "Do you hear it?"

The smile that crossed her face had nothing to do with the faint strains of mandolin music that floated through the open window. It was due to the fact that Vincent now had a way in. There was only one door, and it had been locked, and one window, and it had been locked.

Tariq crossed back and sat down, bothered only by a slight burning down the center of his chest. "Go on."

Ammey closed her eyes and listened to the tempo, then began swaying and moving her hips, before introducing her arms into the dance in the Castilian style her mother had loved so. She had learned it more from her older sister than from her mother, but she'd become good at it through the years.

"Nice," Tariq murmured, fixated on the rotation of her hips. "Very nice." It would have been perfect, but for the burning in his chest and now stomach. His eyes suddenly narrowed, as the cause occurred to him. "Stop!"

She stopped, suddenly aware that he *knew*. He was red, perspiring heavily, his eyes dark and murderous.

"Come here," he hissed.

She went to him at once.

"Sit."

She sat.

"Drink that," he ordered, pointing to his glass of wine. She looked puzzled, but reached for the glass without hesitation and brought it to her mouth to drink. Her confusion and

willingness defused his suspicion enough to allow her to smash the glass against the table and jam the jagged edge into the side of his throat.

Tariq's eyes widened in surprise, and it reminded her of Cael. Only Cael had done nothing wrong. Nothing! She withdrew the glass to stab again, but he seized hold of her throat with a terrible strength born of desperation and fury. He was making a hissing sound and bleeding profusely, but he still had strength enough to kill her, she realized. His hate would sustain him; she could see it in the black eyes boring into hers. She'd failed. And if he was able to stop his bleeding after he killed her, and if he hadn't consumed enough poison—

She clawed at him, but to no avail. Black dots danced in front of her eyes. She would die here, tonight, and her family would never know what had happened to her. She detected a flash of movement behind Tariq, but it was too fast to make sense of, just as the sudden horrified surprise on Tariq's face was.

His grip failed and he crumpled into a heap, leaving her gasping for air, and face to face with Vincent. Vincent reached down to retrieve his dagger from Tariq's back. He wiped it off, slid it back in its sheath, and then stepped over the body, assessing Ammey. She was struggling for breath, and the front of her was covered in blood and wine. Blood was smeared on her throat and matted in her hair. He reached out for her. "Don't fall apart," he commanded, giving her a little shake.

He backed her up and went for her cloak. She didn't resist, but she was shaky and weak. In this state, she'd draw attention to herself for all the wrong reasons. He placed her cloak around her and pulled up the hood. "You did well," he said soothingly.

She knew better. She'd failed and they both knew it.

He pulled her to the door, unlocked it and peered out.

"How did you get in?" she asked, suddenly realizing he'd

been in the room the entire time.

He shushed her, then pulled her through the door and shut it behind them. He put an arm around her and urged her forward, gripping the front of her cloak with his other hand. He bent his face near hers, as if they were lovers sharing a passionate secret. "No one knows anything," he said softly. "And Tariq is dead. That's the most important thing. We did it."

Not we, she thought. You.

He maneuvered her to where he'd hitched his horse, relieved there was no one about at the moment. He considered giving her a light slap to snap her out of the mild stupor she was in, but, instead, moved in and soundly kissed her.

She pushed him away. "What are you doing?"

"Snapping you out of the spell you were under." She was scowling and her eyes were glittering brilliantly. "Besides, I saved your life. You owe me. A lot more than a kiss." Before she could say anything back, he lifted her onto his horse.

"I can get on the horse myself," she objected through clenched teeth.

"No, you can't. You're beautiful, soft and helpless," he replied in his most cavalier manner as he mounted in back of her.

She drew breath to retort, then realized his purpose in baiting her. "Hand me your blade and I'll show you how helpless I am."

He grinned and kicked his horse into motion. He had to return her to the inn. Her part was done but there was still much to accomplish that night.

* * * *

"GOTTA' PISS," Graybil announced as he stumbled out of the alehouse.

Able Gilley watched him, full of dark suspicion. He'd not seen him before, and it was too small a township to miss a man like that. He looked down at his smoothly filed fingernails. "We should find out who he is," he said, to the man across from him. "He has the feel of a spy to me."

The man he addressed elbowed the man next to him. "Come on."

"He's nobody," Gilley the elder stated. "You worry too much."

The men of the third wolf pack hesitated.

"And you drink too much," his son returned coldly. "Go," he ordered the men.

They went. When Voreskae's fair-haired man commanded something, it was done.

* * * *

GRAYBIL HURRIED around the side of the building, wrinkling his nose at the sharp stench of urine. He made sure no one was following, then hurried to the back and crossed the clearing. Forzenay and Stripe emerged from the shadows, having seen him.

"He's not drinking much," Graybil reported. "And he's watching me plenty."

Kidder joined them from a different position, treading with a silent step. "How many are there?"

"Eleven, not counting either Gilley, or the man that left already."

"He doesn't need to be counted anymore," Forzenay stated.

The half-moon disappeared behind the clouds, leaving them in darkness.

"Where's Luttaz?" Kidder asked.

Graybil shook his head. "They haven't said and I haven't seen him."

"He enjoys the whores," Forzenay said.

The moon reappeared, providing some light.

"I'll find him," Stripe offered.

Forzenay nodded, and Stripe hurried off.

"Let's give it awhile longer," Forzenay said. "Gilley has a talent with a blade."

"They all do," Graybil interjected. "They're in there discussing matches and fights to the death, boasting their various victories."

"Anyone can boast," Kidder said.

"They've got the scars to back it up, not to mention Corin's mark."

"It is better to take them on a few at a time," Kidder said.

"If possible," Vincent replied as he joined them from the rear.

"Is she alright?" Forzenay asked. He already knew the execution had been successful because of the prearranged signal Vincent had given afterwards.

"She will be," Vincent replied.

"Did it go as planned?" Kidder asked.

"No. He wasn't drinking ... so she cut his throat."

"Cut his throat," Graybil repeated quietly, deeply surprised she'd had it in her.

"Only not deep enough for him to die quickly," Vincent added.

Kidder frowned. "Was she hurt?"

"He nearly strangled her."

They heard voices and faded back into the shadows as two of Corin's wolf pack came nosing around.

"Looking for me, I imagine," Graybil said quietly. He started toward the men, staggering drunkenly.

Corin's men saw him and made an unconvincing display of nonchalance until he tried to pass them, then one of them grabbed and slammed him against the wall. "What are you doing way back here? Do you have a shy bladder?" the man mocked.

"Wha—" Graybil muttered. "Do I know you?"

"Not yet." The man landed a fist in Graybil's gut, doubling him over. "But you will." The other man picked him up and slammed him back against the wall with a thud.

"What is this?" Graybil objected.

Forzenay could make out a black form skulking down the side of the alehouse. He stared hard, but it wasn't until the man cleared the building that he could positively identify Gilley the younger. "The fates are smiling," he said quietly. "Let's go."

"Who are you?" one of Graybil's assailants demanded.

"What's it to you?" Graybil slurred.

Gilley withdrew a wicked looking dagger from its sheath. "We don't much like strangers, especially ones that look like spies."

"Strangers are just friends you don't know yet," Graybil reasoned good-naturedly.

"He's going to cut you open," Graybil's tormentor breathed right into his face, incensed by his lack of fear.

"I know your kind," Graybil said, narrowing his eyes. "You want a kiss, don't you?"

When the man drew back his fist to strike again, Graybil butted him in the face with the top of his head; then used his momentum forward to go for Gilley's dagger.

The others had closed in by then. Kidder lunged at the second man with his own dagger as Vincent slammed the bloody nosed one against the wall, shoving his chin upwards, grinding his skull against the building. He delivered a single crushing blow to his throat, and the man fell forward, not even able to gasp, clutching his throat with both hands.

The moon had done its disappearing act again so it was too dark to see well, and Graybil probably had it covered, but this was no time to take chances, so Forzenay grabbed the back of Gilley's thick, fair hair and drove the blade of his dagger upwards into the base of the man's skull.

The execution had taken just over a minute for all three men.

"Done," Kidder reported softly.

Vincent's man was still writhing, so he reached down and cut his throat. "Done," he echoed.

"I'm ... done," Graybil said.

His voice was odd, guttural, and they all looked at him as the moon broke free of its cloud cover. His shirtfront was sliced and wet with blood. Kidder rushed to him, and lifted his shirt.

"What is with men, today?" Graybil grunted.

"It's not good," Kidder reported.

"Get him back to the inn," Forzenay ordered.

"No," Graybil objected.

"Go!" Forzenay said.

Kidder put an arm around Graybil and supported him while leading him off.

"Shall we move the bodies?" Vincent asked.

Forzenay thought about it. "It may buy us a minute or two," he decided aloud.

They dragged the bodies into the next alley.

"Someone will come shortly to check on what's going on," Forzenay guessed. "Two men probably. They won't be alarmed yet."

"Let's hope they keep coming two by two."

"We're not that fortunate," Forzenay replied grimly.

* * * *

JORGE LUTTAZ wasn't with one woman; he was with two of them, bragging at his expertise at using blow darts. "I'm so good," he explained, slurring his words so badly they were nearly incomprehensible, "I can hit your ass from across the room, as she blows my dart. Go on. Stand over there. I'll show you."

"No, it'll hurt," a woman argued playfully.

"I won't use a real dart," he laughed. "Go on."

Stripe listened at the door, disgusted with the man, his drunken state, and with wasting time on this when he should helping the others. Out of patience, he opened the door and entered silently, noticed only by the highly inebriated, mildly surprised naked woman stretched out at the foot of the bed. Stripe took hold of Luttaz's head and twisted hard, breaking his neck. The brightly painted whores were too astonished to utter a sound.

"He's got more money in his purse than you ever would have gotten," Stripe said. "It's all yours. By the way, I was never here." He held a finger to his lips and backed out, shutting the door behind him.

The women both looked at Luttaz, now slumped lifelessly against the headboard, then at one another. "What was wrong with his face?" one asked.

"Don't be daft," the other snapped. "Think of what's important. Check the purse!"

* * * *

"THEY'RE RUINED, aren't they?" Ammey asked, as she watched Ulima swirl the soiled clothes around in a large tub using a long stick.

"No," Ulima replied. "If it doesn't come out, we'll soak in a dye made from of plumberries, that's all. Think how pretty you'll be pink." She looked up at Ammey and was heartened to see she had more color in her face. The girl had washed and changed back into her tunic and leggings and they were oddly suiting.

The door was flung open and Kidder helped a bloody Graybil into the room.

"Oh, no," Ammey breathed.

Ulima dropped her stick and both she and Ammey hurried forward to see to Graybil. "What happened?" Ulima asked, gently, lifting his shirt.

His flesh was ripped open and Ammey had to turn away.

"Fix him, Ulima," Kidder begged. "I have to go."

"I'll fix him," Ulima replied calmly. "He'll be fine. Won't you, Graybil?"

Graybil let out a puff of air that sounded like, "Yeah—" Kidder looked pained as he turned to go.

"Kidder, wait," Ammey begged. "What's happening?"

"We got Gilley the younger, and he got us," he said, nodding to Graybil. "Three others are dead, besides Tariq. I've got to go."

"Where?"

"The alehouse. The rest of them are there. It'll come to a fight and soon."

"I'm coming, too," Ammey said. "Ulima, I need a sword."

"No," Kidder argued. "Ammey, I—"

"It's mounted above the bar," Ulima cut him off.

"Take mine," Graybil grunted.

Ammey moved close to him. It was obvious he was in great pain. "Are you sure?" she asked gently.

He nodded. His eyes were glassy, his breathing shallow.

"Just for tonight," she said, with a weak smile. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "For luck," she whispered.

* * * *

"WHERE'S MY SON?" Gilley Senior asked in a loud voice. "And where are the others?"

It was a good question. Besides the fair-hair, four of their number had gone out and not come back. It was enough to alert several men, who got to their feet and moved toward the door.

Xavier's heart began pounding. Something was coming; he could feel it. He looked at Gilley Senior, knowing his end was coming soon, most likely at the jagged end of a broken glass.

The door was slung open and there was a moment of confusion as five of Corin's men tried to get out at the same time a pair of highly vocal drunks pushed to get in. It took Xavier a few moments to realize the drunks were Vincent and Stripe. He'd no sooner adjusted to that fact then the fight began. Stripe, in front, ran at the two members of the pack

who were still at the table. One fell easily, caught by surprise, but the other had a chance to get to his feet and draw his blade. He was an enormous man, nearly seven feet tall, with a chest the size of a barrel.

Vincent headed right back out the door, attacking the pack from the rear as Forzenay attacked from the front. Both were able to dispatch the first man they came to, due to the element of surprise, but the other three were just as quickly in action and they were masters of the sword.

* * * *

INSIDE, a few locals drew their blades, not certain as to what was going on or which side to take, but Xavier ordered them back, and blades down, even as he drew his own and moved toward Gilley the elder. The old man whirled around with a vicious looking double dagger in each hand. His eyes were aglow with excitement. Where the incapacitated drunk had gone, Xavier did not know.

"Come on," the elder taunted.

Stripe was faster, both on his feet and with the blade, but his hulk-like opponent was stronger. He beat down Vincent's blade with incredible strength, wearing him down. Stripe was not usually one to feel doubt and panic in the middle of an engagement, but he felt it now.

* * * *

KIDDER AND AMMEY rode back to the alehouse at a breakneck speed. They could hardly believe the scene as they got close. Forzenay was up against two swordsmen, losing

ground and close to being pinned against the building. Vincent was bleeding and his opponent was advancing steadily.

Ammey jumped from the horse and hit the ground running. Vincent looked to be in the worst way, and Kidder was coming right behind her to help with Forzenay, so she went after Vincent's attacker, a lean, well-muscled, bald man with bloodlust in his eyes.

He saw her approach and adjusted to ward off her attack. His challenge was now to finish off the wounded man and subdue the woman. Anyone who looked like that should be ridden and ridden hard before dying, and he was the man to do it. He'd have her first and then pass her around to the others. He beat down both their blades, wishing he had a second blade handy himself. Unfortunately for them, he'd trained for just such an attack.

Kidder drew off one of Forzenay's attackers and was immediately dismayed by the man's strength. How had it come to this? Outnumbered, outmatched, this was not how they worked.

* * * *

INSIDE, the hulk was steadily advancing on Stripe. Xavier, also backing up, had invited his townsmen to jump in and assist, but none had moved. They were too afraid, he knew. And why not? These were Corin's men, known for vicious attack and even more vicious retribution. Xavier's sword was longer, but the elder had the advantage of apparent insanity.

Still, when Xavier hit the wall, he had no choice, but to attack.

The elder knew it was coming and hurled one of his daggers. Xavier tried to side step it, but it struck his arm, slicing it open. Xavier lunged, despite the burning pain, and his blade cut below Gilley's left shoulder. The old man screamed and swung with his other dagger, but Xavier twisted the sword, bringing the elder to his knees. Xavier withdrew the blade and quickly stabbed again, lower, through the heart.

* * * *

AMMEY REALIZED the bald man had managed to maneuver them where he wanted them. *Think*, she commanded herself. What had Anthony always drilled into her? Thinking won a match. You have to outthink your opponent. Do the unexpected; be in control. She made a quick, calculated risk, jumping out and forcing her blade against the bald man's. The man wanted Vincent dead; it had become apparent he did not necessarily want her dead.

Vincent was forced to withdraw in order not to hit her, and in that strange, timeless instant, he saw Kidder's blade go flying, knocked out of his hand by his opponent. He forced his body in motion even before the man drew back to run Kidder through. Vincent's blade cut through the back of the man, just as that man's blade made contact with Kidder's midsection, only Kidder was already jumping back in avoidance.

The tide had turned. Forzenay felt it and the realization lent him the daring to rush his man and deal a fatal slash across his lower body, laying open his intestines.

* * * *

XAVIER THREW the double dagger at the hulk, but he didn't have the skill of Gilley the elder. It hit a buttock, and the blow only served to distract the big man for a moment. Stripe, gasping and dizzy with exhaustion, used that split second for his last stand. Using both hands and all that was left of his strength; he hefted the blade up under the chin of the big man.

The hulk eyes grew large, then his sword clanked noisily to the floor just before he fell forward with a loud crash. Stripe lost the grip on his own sword and dropped to his knees, too weak to continue standing.

* * * *

"I'M NOT GOING to kill you yet," the bald man taunted Ammey. He was advancing and she was steadily withdrawing. "Do you know why?"

"You're .. going to .. die first?" she grunted out between parries.

He drew breath to laugh, but never completed the sound since Vincent, swinging with both hands, decapitated the man.

Forzenay saw it done then rushed inside, followed by Kidder.

For several moments, Ammey couldn't do anything but recover her strength, and Vincent was doing the same. "What are you doing here?" he finally managed to ask.

The question seemed conversational, which struck her as funny, and she began laughing. He couldn't help laughing, too, which made her laugh even harder. She leaned forward on her sword, laughing until she cried. It was mad. There was a headless man on the ground between them, a man who'd wanted to kill them both, and who'd been capable of doing just that. Vincent was hurt, bleeding, and they'd all nearly died that night. And they couldn't stop laughing.

* * * *

"THESE WERE THE WOLVES of Bellux-Abry and their commanders," Xavier bellowed. Now that it was over, he was furious that no one had come to their aid when they'd been so close to perishing. "And you stand and do nothing?"

Forzenay stepped in, sweeping the room with his eyes and assessing what had occurred. Kidder was right behind him and he rushed to Stripe and helped him get back to his feet. "Are you alright?"

"I have no feeling in my arms," Stripe replied dully.

"Do you think this isn't your fight?" Xavier continued to rant.

"It happened so fast," someone said.

Forzenay noted the guilty look on several faces.

Lightheadedness came over Xavier and he knew he needed to get home and have his arm tended to. "The least you can

do is to get rid of the bodies," he said in a weaker voice.

"Bury them, burn them, weight them and drop them at sea."

"I'll do it," a man said.

Another stepped forward. "I'll help."

"I'm in," a third called out. Several more spoke up, shamed into action.

"And you must be sworn to secrecy," Xavier muttered, starting toward the door. "You saw nothing. You know nothing."

Men nodded. Some muttered oaths.

Xavier turned back, feeling a renewed surge of anger. "Or I swear by all the gods—"

"Xavier," Forzenay interrupted the threat before it was uttered. "Let's go."

* * * *

THE INN had become a makeshift surgery, complete with pallets on the floor for those who were too injured to make it to their rooms. Graybil was sleeping on one.

Ulima looked each of the new arrivals over one by one, sighing and shaking her head with each injury. "Everyone wanted a scar or two to remember tonight by. Was that it? I'll start with you," she said to her husband. "Have a drink and sit. That's a nasty piece of work."

"The handiwork of an interesting double dagger," Xavier said, pulling it out and showing it to her. "Worth keeping, I thought."

"How special. A scar and a keepsake. Drink. Sit."

"How is he?" Stripe asked quietly as he moved close to where Graybil was sleeping.

"You needn't be quiet," Ulima replied curtly. "He's had wine of opium, and he's out. And he's favored by the gods, is what he is. He was cut but good, but it missed his stomach by that much," she held her thumb and forefinger slightly apart. It may have nicked a lung, but not enough to collapse it. Some rest and he'll be fine. We just have to keep him still."

"He'll be taken back to his village," Forzenay announced.

Kidder whirled around to him. "Why?" he demanded. "He should stay here."

Forzenay was suddenly avoiding looking at any of them.

Vincent collapsed into a chair, realizing Forzenay had known what would happen tonight. He'd known Graybil would be hurt. "The seidh foretold this," he guessed.

Every eye turned to Forzenay. "I knew there would be an injury," the black man admitted. "I did not know which of us it would be."

"But why take him back to Daleog?" Kidder asked. "Did the seidh say we were to do that?"

"Not we," Forzenay replied. "We go on to Shilbridge, as was decided." He looked at Ammey. "You'll take him."

She was stunned. "I ... don't know the way."

Vincent tried to control the frustration that rose up in him. "Need I remind you, she helped save our lives tonight? Or that packs of trained killers roam the country?"

"No," Forzenay snapped, turning a stony glare on Vincent. "You needn't remind me of that." He turned back to Ammey. "Graybil will tell you the way. You'll leave tomorrow."

It was decided, she realized. Because it was meant to be? It didn't feel meant to be, not to her. It felt more right to stay together, or for her to return home. She wanted to object but she also wanted to obey the mandates she'd been given. "May I ask?"

"What?" Forzenay prodded, when she grew silent.

"How did the seidhkona save your life before? When we first arrived, Milainah said she was glad to see you, that she wasn't certain they would see you again."

Forzenay nodded. He carried a bottle of wine over to the table and went back for glasses. "We were in Ghlaxmire, trying to learn what we could of the siege."

Ammey blinked in confusion. "Siege?"

He returned with glasses and they sat across from one another, on either side of Vincent. "Corin called it an annexation, but it was a siege," he continued. "We'd spent long days finding a place to blend into the village, all of us separate as not to be noticed. Things were going well." Forzenay took a deep breath and battled a biting wave of pain from the wound on his leg.

"I'll get you next, Forzenay," Ulima said. "Take some wine now. Stripe, get it for him."

"I've got it," Forzenay replied.

"Not that," Ulima snapped. "The opium."

"Not yet," Forzenay argued. "It dulls my senses too rapidly."

"Rather the point," Ulima replied.

Ammey leaned forward and poured glasses of wine, and Stripe walked over and picked up the small glasses filled with

wine of opium that Ulima had already measured out, and carried them to the table for when it was time.

Kidder joined the others at the table but waved off the offer for wine. He reached over and pulled a chair from another table for Stripe, who then collapsed into it with a grunt.

"One evening," Vincent took over, "we all ended up at this large tavern. There was a meeting of townsmen."

"Who opposed the annexation," Kidder threw in. "It was a big gathering."

"But a friendly atmosphere," Stripe said, reaching for a glass of berry wine. "There was heavy drinking, different men buying rounds." He sighed and took a drink. "I'm almost too tired to lift this glass," he commented.

"A plan began to come together to fight Bellux-Abry,"
Kidder said, taking over the story. "Then another drink came
round, this one blue. Made from the wild loira, someone said.
It was a specialty of the tavern."

"Called blue of the sea," Vincent said, as if the name held significance. "They called it that because they didn't want anyone outside the village to know how they made it, that it came from the wild loira."

She nodded, not understanding the serious, even fervent expressions on their faces.

"Forzenay, you're next," Ulima said.

"In a bit," he hedged.

"Now," she insisted. "You're bloodying up my floor."

It was true. Dark blood had saturated his leggings and was now pooling under his foot.

He pushed back in his chair and she knelt to dress his wounds. She started by ripping an even bigger tear near the cut.

"Drink," she said, impatiently. He reached for one of the tiny glasses that contained wine of opium but merely held it. "I'll rely on you to finish the story," he said, looking at the three men sitting around the table. "But—" He turned his gaze on Ammey. "—was that what you truly wanted to ask?"

"I did want to know, yes," she said hesitantly.

"But you are further wondering," Forzenay coaxed. She swallowed. "Did the seidh say I was to take Graybil?" "Yes."

"Then there's a reason," she ventured. It was no longer a question. It seemed certain.

"I don't know your path, Ammey McKeaf, but I know there is one." He downed the liquid opium, trying not to taste it. Even sweetened with sugar, it was bitter.

"Well, we can't leave tonight as planned," Kidder said, stating the obvious.

Forzenay shook his head. "On the morrow. We have to get a cart to transport Graybil home in the morning. He should be kept prone and as comfortable as possible. Then we go." Forzenay gasped and cringed as Ulima poured a burning liquid over his wound. He closed his eyes, already feeling the pull of the opium. She was sewing his leg with quick, sure stitches, just as she'd done numerous times before. No one could sew a man up like Ulima.

Xavier stumbled over and sat at the table next to theirs. "Good as new," he said weakly, then he put his head on the table and slept.

"You're next, Vincent," Ulima interrupted. "You might want to drink up."

"Kidder can be next," Vincent replied, not wanting to be done with the night just yet. "He was nicked in the gut."

"Barely," Kidder said. "You're worse."

Vincent gave him a look. "Go next."

"Or I can be next," Kidder said agreeably. "Anyway, back to the story—"

"We have to tell her about the seidh, first," Stripe reminded him. He looked at Ammey. "You haven't seen it yet, but sometimes, they go into a state where they ... see things. Especially Milainah. They talk, sometimes with voices other than their own."

"It's frightening," Kidder admitted.

"Even her face changes somewhat," Vincent added.

"That's even more frightening," Kidder added.

"How?" Ammey asked quietly.

"I've seen her look like an old woman," Vincent said.

"Anyway, the time we were there before Ghlaxmire, Milainah went into this trance or state, whatever you want to call it."

"It was after a ceremony," Stripe added. "Very formal and ... sacred, I suppose you'd say."

"Let's see if I can recall it," Kidder said, closing his eyes.

"She said, 'Blue drink of the sea, but not—

Will burn like fire and rot.

Dull gazes of death, I see.

Drink not the drink of the sea."

Ammey rubbed her arms, suddenly chilled. Everything was so much more involved than she'd realized.

"It didn't mean much at the time," Kidder said. "And not for sometime after. Not until that night, until that drink was served. We all looked at one another from across the room."

"All the men around us were drinking," Stripe said. "We didn't know whether to warn them, or whether we'd be making something out of nothing. I asked who'd bought the round, as if I wanted to thank the man."

"It was the bartender," Vincent said, his eyes narrowing as he recalled it. "I remember the look on his face. I warned the few men around me who hadn't drunk it yet, not to. Even knocked it from one man's hand."

"And then they started dropping," Kidder said.

"Drink," Ulima reminded Kidder, backhanding his shoulder.
"It's safe. I made it myself."

He smiled at her, downed the shot of opium, and grimaced. "You ought to work on that recipe, Ulima."

She glanced up at Forzenay, who looked lost to the world. "I just put nearly forty stitches in him, and he doesn't seem to mind. I think the recipe works fine, thank you."

"Good point," Kidder conceded.

"Besides, you wouldn't want to go liking the taste too much," she warned. "Now, turn," she ordered Kidder. "Lift your shirt."

"Women are always saying that to me," he jested as he obeyed the command.

"Not too bad," she said, studying the small gash.

Kidder looked at Vincent. "That's because I was in motion, and someone had my back."

"Someone had mine," Vincent returned.

"How are we going to do without you, Ammey McKeaf?" Stripe spoke up. "There'll be nobody pretty to look at night after you're sleeping and don't know better."

She dropped her eyes and fought an urge to weep.

"Perhaps we won't have to do without her for long," Vincent said quietly.

Stripe stood, understanding that they needed a few minutes of privacy. "I'm whole enough, Ulima. I'm going to bed."

She nodded, having already arrived at the same conclusion.

"Take Forzenay, will you?" she asked, without even looking up from Kidder's stitches.

Stripe walked over and hefted him up as gently as possible. Forzenay complied, although he walked like the living dead.

"Those men tonight," Ammey said, to no one in particular.

"They were the some of the best swordsmen I've ever seen."

Vincent nodded. "The best of the best. Or so they claim."

She looked at him, wondering if he fully realized how good they were. She'd seen the best swordsmen of the country. Her brothers ranked among the best, and these men were that good, not to mention incredibly strong.

"You saw the marks on their arms?" Kidder asked, speaking more slowly than before. "The symbol?"

"Yes. What was it?"

"Corin's mark ... for his best warriors. His wolves. After they undergo training and pass..."

"Tests?" Vincent supplied. Kidder's mind was wandering. Kidder nodded slowly.

Vincent turned to Ammey. "Tests of strength, courage and so many kills. Then they're ranked as the elite and they earn the *privilege* to be marked with the Uraz rune. A very painful process, I understand."

"I'd say," Ulima spoke up. "This needle? This is nothing. Imagine one much larger, hammered deep into the flesh, enough to cause a hole. Then they rub a dye in."

Ammey cringed. "Doesn't it bleed?" "Oh, yes."

"The Uraz," Ammey murmured, trying to recall what it stood for.

"It's the rune of masculine strength and power," Vincent replied. "It is the power of destiny and the will to power. It eliminates all weaknesses, transforms them to strengths."

"You're done," Ulima said to Kidder.

"So I am," he agreed.

"Come on," she said, helping him to his feet. "We can still get you to your own bed and you can get a good night's rest."

"I should stay with Graybil, in case he wakes," he objected in a slurred voice.

"He'll be watched," she coaxed, keeping him moving forward. "I promise."

Only Vincent and Ammey were left at the table. There was too much to say and, as a result, the room grew too quiet.

"You made all the difference tonight," Vincent said, finally breaking the silence.

"You saved my life, first," she reminded him.

"That's what we do for one another," he said. "No scores, no debts—"

"Then what was that about me owing you?" she teased.

His gaze intensified. "Let's say you do, and that I owe you."

The intensity in his eyes robbed her of breath and she had to look away.

"Ammey—" he uttered softly.

"I have to do what they tell me," she said softly, not daring to look at him. If she kept looking at him, she didn't know what would happen. She'd weaken. She'd end up in his arms, begging him not to let her go. She had not truly known it until this moment, but she was in love with him.

They heard Ulima's footsteps returning.

"We'll meet again," he told her. "I know we will."

"Time for you," Ulima announced, as she walked through the room. "Drink."

Vincent picked up the small glass and downed its contents.

"You should get some rest, dear," Ulima advised Ammey.

Ammey looked at Vincent. "Do you need to hold my hand while she sews?"

His eyes were already glazing over. "It's the only time I don't need to," he said.

"Go on," Ulima urged. "Off to bed. You've a big day tomorrow, my girl."

Ammey got up to her feet. "Good night."

"Goodnight," Ulima returned.

"Goodnight, Ammey McKeaf," Vincent said with the barest hint of a smile playing on his lips.

Ammey felt herself being watched as she left the room and she was glad of it. It made her feel less lonely than she otherwise would have.

CHAPTER 4: The Wolves

AMMEY DID NOT fully trust her hearing. "Gone?"

"Yes," Ulima replied. "This morning. Early. They had to get to Shilbridge." She watched Ammey absorb the news. "Sit down," she said, tenderly. It was apparent the young woman was stunned by the news. They were in the kitchen and Ulima got up to pour some tea for Ammey.

"But the wagon—"

"We have a cart."

Ammey sat. There was a fire crackling in the hearth and the scent of freshly cooked food lingering in the air, but she felt cold and empty.

"You'll stay another few days, until Graybil is strong enough to travel," Ulima continued as she prepared the tea.

Ammey felt a stirring of hope. "Will they be back by then?"
Ulima returned to the table with the mug of the strong,
black tea and some slices of freshly baked bread. "It's not
likely. Eat." She sat back down. The girl's heartbreak was as
heart wrenching as the bruising around her neck. It looked
bad this morning. She could clearly make out hand and

"If it had not been for Vincent—" Ammey said softly. "Vincent," Ulima murmured.

staring at the bruises. "But you must have nearly died."

thumbprints. "You said he choked you," Ulima commented,

Ammey looked at her, wondering what she was thinking. "Ammey, these men—"

The young woman simply waited, knowing a warning was coming.

"They are friends of mine and I hold each in high esteem," Ulima began. "But they are not simple men. They've each had tragedy in their lives and they've each answered a calling to address that tragedy, or any that needn't have occurred."

"I know they're not simple," Ammey replied. The truth was that she knew very little about them, about any of them, even the one she'd fallen in love with.

"You will have many choices," Ulima continued, her face and voice full of compassion. "Theirs is not the life for you."

What if I want it to be? "What if—" She broke off, not confident of the right words. "Isn't it possible ... they won't be doing it forever?"

Ulima took a deep breath and exhaled before replying. "These are the beginnings of bad times, I fear. We, none of us, know the future."

Ammey picked up her mug and allowed some of the warmth to penetrate her hands. She sipped, putting all her effort into not weeping. She was no innocent girl, after all. She was a woman who had helped to end the lives of men only the night before. She must not, would not, begin acting as if she was a child.

"There's something else, something important," Ulima said slowly.

Ammey felt herself tense. "What?"

"Forzenay and I talked this morning. You're to take Graybil to his home."

Ammey nodded. She knew this.

"But as soon as he's well enough to ride, he must come back." She leaned forward, her forehead creased with earnestness. "He must be back by the next full moon."

"Why?"

"One of their lives depends upon it. That's all I was told." Ammey swallowed. "Am I to come back, as well?" Ulima looked away. "No."

Ammey bit her bottom lip to keep the tears at bay. Was she not wanted back because she'd failed with Tariq?

"And Graybil won't wish to," Ulima continued, looking back at the young woman. "You'll have to explain what I said, but not too soon. Allow him the rest and peace of mind he needs to recover."

"Do you know ... why ... I am not to come back?" Ammey bit out. She hated asking, but not knowing would be even more agonizing.

Ulima sighed. "No, I don't. I'm only passing on what I was told." She reached across the table and took hold of the young woman's hand. "We're either at war, Ammey, or we will be very soon. All we can do is to get through it. Do our parts. I know it's not what you want to hear. It's not what I want to tell you."

"I am glad I met you," Ammey said, sincerely. She attempted to smile and managed a weak one.

"And I, you, my dear."

"Your strength," Ammey said, wishing to put some of her regard into words, "—and your calm, they've been an inspiration."

Ulima smiled and squeezed Ammey's hand. "If you can believe in an old woman's intuition, I believe you'll see Vincent again. All of them, in fact."

Ammey's eyes grew large before she jerked them away from Ulima's, which held candor as well as compassion. Her face flamed at the specific mention of Vincent. Had she been that obvious? Was it that she had offered to hold his hand?

Ulima saw and understood the reaction. "It's alright, Ammey. No one else knows, except perhaps Vincent. It's just that a woman knows. A woman recognizes." The words were spoken for comfort rather than truth, which was not her usual way, but she cared for Ammey. Besides, nothing had been discussed, as far as she knew—although none of the Five could have been oblivious to what was between Vincent and Ammey.

"I have a favor to ask," Ammey said, wishing desperately to change the subject.

"Anything in my power," Ulima pledged.

"I need my father and brothers to know I'm safe."

Ulima pulled back and withdrew a folded letter from her belt. "Forzenay left instructions to have this sent to the Forge today. It explains all that's happened." She set in on the table. "It's not sealed. He felt you would want to read it."

Ammey nodded. "I'm grateful he thought of it."

"He tries to think of everything," Ulima said. "His band and their mission ... it's his life. He allows nothing else in." She smiled a sad smile, shrugged and reached for her tea. The cup was cold so she didn't bother drinking. "Of course, if you wish to add a letter to your family—"

"Oh, yes, I would," Ammey said at once. "Thank you."

* * * *

ULIMA SQUINTED as the cart transporting Graybil and Ammey grew small in the distance.

"Aunt? You sent for me?" a boy's voice asked behind her. She turned and smiled at her sixteen-year old nephew.

"Marcus, I have an important deed that needs doing."

He came closer, hoping the request would be to join Forzenay and the others in some effort.

"I need letters delivered to Stonewater Forge."

The request surprised him. "Stonewater Forge?"

"To the McKeaf, himself," she said, knowing he would be impressed. She was right. His eyes glistened with excitement. "It's a long way," she reminded him. "A week's worth of hard riding."

He nodded. "I can do it."

"I know you can, but—"

"But what?"

"There are dangerous men about," she warned. Marcus's curly, fair hair always made him seem younger than he was. Even now, as she charged him with an important duty, she had to resist running a hand over his curls. "I want you to find a few other men to ride with."

"Alright," he agreed, smiling at her over-protectiveness.

"Good riders, able to defend themselves," she continued.

"And you'll take your uncle's spyglass and keep a sharp eye out."

"I will."

She patted his cheek. "You're such a fine young man. I want you to live to be a fine old man."

"You worry too much since my mother died."

She shrugged, knowing it was true.

"Where are the letters?" he asked.

She pulled them from her belt and handed them over.

"That young woman that was here—"

He looked up at her with a shocked expression.

Ulima nodded. "The daughter of the McKeaf. They'll be worried about her."

"Why was she here? Why was she with the Five?"

"Fate, I think. One thing led to another. It's all explained in the letters."

Marcus held them close. "They'll be glad to get these."

"Yes, they will. But you must be careful. It's more important that you arrive, than that you arrive quickly. Do you understand?"

"I do," he assured her. "I'll be fine. Stop worrying."

"I will stop worrying the moment you walk back through that door safe and sound."

He grinned, certain that was true.

"I would have you survey an area with the spyglass and then ride," she admitted. "Short distances, keep cover when you can, all the way to the Forge."

"Stonewater Forge," he said, awed by the prospect. "I have always wanted to see it, and to meet the McKeaf."

"I know."

"Thank you for trusting me with this."

"You're worthy of trust, my boy. There's no need to thank me. Now, go and get your uncle's spyglass. I meant what I said. Survey then ride. You cannot be too careful, Marcus."

"I understand," he assured her. "I do."

* * * *

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED to be riding," Ammey reminded Graybil, who was walking alongside the cart.

"I've been on my back for five days, Ammey McKeaf. Do you want to hear me howl at the moon?"

They were losing the light, anyway. "Is this a good place to stop?" she asked.

"See the hill ahead?"

"Yes."

"Once we top that, you'll see the finger lakes. We'll stop by the lake."

"At least ride up the hill," she urged.

He climbed onto the seat to appease her. When they reached the peak of the hill, she drew in a sharp breath and reined in the horse. He looked over and grinned, proud of the landmark this region was known for. "As if the mother of all creation imprinted her hand deeply in the earth," he observed.

Ammey was awed by the colossal handprint she saw before her. There was a shallow, almost square lakebed, which diverged in five different directions, four to the east, and one, the thumb, to the northeast. The tips of each finger lake seemed the deepest; its color darker. "They're supposed to be cursed, though, or is it sacred?" she mused, trying to

remember what she'd heard of them. "Not to be touched or drank from."

"No, you can drink or fish from any part of the lake. There's enormous fish in there, in fact, sturgeon. And you can swim there," he pointed at the shallow square that made up the palm. What you're not supposed to do, in theory, is to get into the deep ends."

"The fingertips," she said.

"Exactly."

She slapped the reins, starting the horse down the hill.

"It's an old tale," Graybil continued. "I have seen boys jump in and come back out. Dares. Tests of courage. I don't know how the story got started, although most still believe it."

"Have you?" she asked, lightly. "Tested your courage there?"

"Me? Oh, no. I avoid danger whenever possible."

She laughed. "What's supposed to happen if you jump in the tip of a finger?"

"You're considered an offering and pulled into the underworld, to serve whatever god or goddess discovered the transgression or offering, whatever it's considered to be."

"Ah."

"We'll be at my village tomorrow," he announced quietly.

"Have you family there, still?"

"Oh, yes. I have a wife—"

She jerked her head so suddenly, a muscle burned in the back of her neck. "A wife!"

"And a daughter."

She exhaled in surprise.

"And I can tell you, *you* will require some explanation," he said, making a face that suggested worry.

"I had no idea," she admitted. "Are ... any of the others married?"

"Any in particular you're curious about?" he teased. She immediately blushed and he felt badly. "No," he assured her quickly. "None of the others are married."

She stopped the cart near the lake and climbed down. He, too, climbed down carefully, mindful of his stitches. "We'll feast on fish tonight," he announced.

"Good. I'm hungry." She led the horse forward to drink, peering curiously into the black water of the nearest fingertip.

"They say it's bottomless," Graybil remarked. "But, it would be, wouldn't it?"

* * * *

THE MEN OF THE FIRST WOLF PACK were stopping to make camp for the night when Kasper Fhecvoe, still on his horse, caught sight of something in the distance. Peering through a spyglass, he saw riders. "Look there," he said to his brother riding next to him.

L'neal Fhecvoe spotted them. They were both pretty boys. They were too old to be hairless, but nor were they fully grown either. "Shall we tell the others?"

Kasper made a face. "And listen to boys scream all night? I need a night's sleep."

"I'll wager I can hit one from here," L'neal said, reaching for his bow.

"Which one?"

"On the right. The one with the dark hair."

Kasper reached for his own bow and an arrow. "I'll hit mine dead on," he challenged. "You'll mayhaps scratch the horse."

"You, mayhaps, can scratch my arse," L'neal snarled as he took aim and let an arrow fly.

Kasper had gotten his off faster. He reached for his spyglass to see the result. He laughed victoriously. His prey was down, of course. "You got an arm. Barely!" Not only that, but the boy had panicked and taken off in the other direction, back toward the woods. Kasper grabbed another arrow, took aim again and hit the retreating boy squarely in the center of his back. "Two hits," Kasper said. "Mine!"

* * * *

JOSHUA ASHLON FLEW out of the woods, frustrated with the others for taking such a long lead. It wasn't his fault his nag was slower. It had nothing to do with riding skill. Nothing, whatsoever. His friends merely wanted to be first to the Forge.

He saw their bodies before he fully understood what it meant. Pulling back on the reins and turning his horse around was more reaction than thought, although the shock and horror he felt was very real. He dismounted in the shelter of the woods and crept back to the clearing to make certain of what he'd seen.

Liam was closer, lying on his front. Two arrows had pierced his body, one in his arm, and one in the center of his back.

He must have been headed back to the woods. Marcus was further out, lying on his back, an arrow sticking out from a blood-soaked circle on his chest. They were dead. How could they be dead? They'd only been a short distance in front of him, and he hadn't heard a thing, not a sound, not a cry. Nothing!

The letters were still tucked in Marcus's belt. He could see them flapping in the breeze. He could get them; he could go on to the Forge, but that would mean risking the same fate as Marcus and Liam. A buzzard suddenly landed atop Marcus, and it startled Joshua back a step. He turned, not able to bear the sight, and stumbled back to his horse. He threw his arms around the nag's neck, thankful for her age, thankful to be alive, and wept grievously for his friends.

When he was able to, he mounted his horse and headed back home. He would not go on. He wanted to live.

* * * *

"WHAT'S YOUR wife's name?" Ammey asked. It was late and they were stretched out on their bedrolls. The fire crackled, lighting the side of Graybil's face. It was apparent he was deep in thought.

"Ianthe."

"And your daughter?"

"Liani. She's eight and the image of her mother."

Ammey turned on her side, toward Graybil. "Why are you with Forzenay and the others?"

He stared up at the dancing stars and thought about how to explain. "Several years ago, we learned that a man in

Benongh, the very next village, had been tortured, burned, left barely alive. For no reason. He didn't know his attackers and they gave no reason for their action. It was for pleasure, for enjoyment, if you can imagine such a thing. We further learned there had been several of these attacks from as far away as Qaddys. We couldn't simply ignore it, so we began tracking the culprits. That's when I met Forzenay, Stripe and a few others you don't know of." He paused. "They had a mission and I knew I could be a part of it. So, I pledged a few years of my life to them."

"How long ago was that?"

"Six or seven years ago," he replied drolly. "And, yes, I will be having this conversation with my wife. But it's about something more, now. This isn't the time to leave."

"Are you able to get home very often?" she asked.

"Several times a year."

A silence settled over them, broken only by a chorus of tree frogs.

"Did you find the men responsible for the tortures you spoke of?" Ammey pursued a few minutes later.

"Oh, yes."

His expression hardened and she decided not to pursue it. "When did Kidder and Vincent join you?"

"Not long after I did."

She grew silent again. She knew what she wanted to ask and so did he. But it wasn't his place to tell her. That's what he would say. "I wonder what they're doing, now," she murmured.

"Drifting toward sleep," he replied. "Wondering the same of us." He closed his eyes. "They call me Flynn."

She'd just begun dozing. She opened her eyes. "Flynn?"

"It's my name. Flynn Graybil. My friends used to call me Gray. I never cared for Flynn."

"I understand disliking the name you were given," she said sleepily. "Goodnight, Flynn," she added teasingly.

"Goodnight, Amaris."

She cringed, not realizing the seidh had apparently shared this information. "Sleep well, Graybil," she quickly corrected herself.

"And you, Ammey," he returned.

* * * *

GRAYBIL WAS WELCOMED like a returning hero. Although he had to keep most everyone at arm's length, given his recent injury, he was kissed and patted and fondly greeted by young and old alike.

Ianthe Graybil was a plain woman, yet somehow intriguing. She had a wide streak of gray in her otherwise brownish-auburn hair and a very direct gaze. "You're not one of the Five?" she asked Ammey with obvious concern.

"No," Ammey replied quickly.

"She was in the right place at the wrong time," Graybil explained to his wife. "And she got swept up with us."

"Papa!" shrieked a freckle-faced girl with hair redder than her mother's.

Ianthe barely stopped the child from leaping into her father's arms. "Ho, your papa's belly is hurt."

"There's my girl," Graybil said, kneeling to embrace her.

"And look at you! You've grown taller!"

Someone clapped Ammey on the back. "Welcome," the man greeted with a fervent nod and an amazed looking smile.

"Yes, welcome," several others greeted.

"Ammey McKeaf is her name," Graybil said, to the gathering crowd.

"McKeaf?" someone repeated.

"Not the McKeaf's of the Forge?"

Ammey was embarrassed by the attention, but also pleased and proud to have the name recognized.

"Yes," Graybil confirmed.

"You're the daughter of the McKeaf?" Ianthe asked. She looked at her husband and then back at Ammey.

"Who's the McKeaf?" Liani asked.

"He's a great General," her father said. "And his daughter is our friend."

Another little girl finagled her way through the legs of the crowd, this one a dark-haired beauty, perhaps a year or two older than Liani, but far more willowy and frail looking.

"Hello, Catherin," Graybil greeted.

The child smiled shyly.

"We should prepare a feast," a man called.

"Indeed, we shall," a woman said.

"It's good to see you, Gray," a man said.

"You must have so much to tell," another spoke up.

"In time," Ianthe replied firmly as she helped her husband to his feet. "Liani, you and Catherin show mistress McKeaf to the guest lodge and to the falls."

The girls jumped to take hold of Ammey's hands. "It's Ammey," she said to Ianthe.

Ianthe nodded. "Ammey," she repeated, cooly. "Very well."

* * * *

"THIS IS THE GORGE," Liani announced a few minutes later. "You can hear the falls."

"I can," Ammey agreed. Rock walls towered a thousand feet above them. Ammey looked up as she walked and became a little dizzy at the height. The walls widened, revealing part of a lake. Two waterfalls gushed from above with a roar. "It's beautiful," Ammey said. She had to speak loudly to be heard.

"Will you live here now?" Catherin asked, hopefully.

"No. I'm just staying awhile. My home is to the south."

"I don't have a mother," Catherin announced.

"She died," Liani added.

"I'm sorry. My mother died when I was young, too."

Ammey undressed and bathed in the lake, swimming under and around the falls. The girls watched and whispered and giggled, and Ammey was reminded of herself and Theresa when were young and close. Finally, the girls unclothed themselves, got in the water and swam to Ammey. They were good swimmers.

"I can disappear under the water," Liani said, spitting out water as she spoke. "And not come up for a long time."

Catherin grinned. "Me, too. We could go under and not come up until dark."

"I hope not," Ammey replied with a worried frown. "I would be in such trouble with everyone in camp."

"We can," Liani sang.

"How?" Ammey asked.

"We could show her," Catherin said.

"Mama says we're not to scare people anymore. Remember last time?"

"There's holes in the rocks," Catherin said.

Liani frowned and splashed at her friend. "I was going to tell her!" She turned to Ammey. "There's holes in the rocks, under the water and they lead to the caves."

"I imagine that would scare someone, if you simply disappeared," Ammey said with a serious expression. "I would have been very frightened."

* * * *

CATHERIN SLIPPED HER HAND in Ammey's as they walked back to the guest lodge. It was a sweet feeling. Ammey squeezed the small hand lightly and smiled down at the child. The lodge was good sized and plain, with four cots and a good-sized table and chairs.

They supped that evening on simple fare, but the people were kind and gracious, generously offering whatever they had. Ammey could tell there was a mild strain between Graybil and Ianthe and kept her attention focused elsewhere. The truth was, she felt for Ianthe. She knew the constant ache of missing. To know your husband was somewhere else when he could be with you would be terrible, not to mention

the worry that had to be involved knowing he was frequently involved in dangerous pursuits.

The lodge felt large and empty that night. Ammey built up the fire and then settled into bed and watched the flames until they were mere backdrop for the memory of Vincent as he pressed a kiss to her lips. I saved your life. You owe me a lot more than a kiss. She smiled softly and closed her eyes, but she still saw him so clearly. He'd held her captive in a green field and told her she was beautiful and that men would want her. How much had he wanted her at that moment? Or had his feelings developed later?

"Vincent," she murmured. Could he feel how much she longed to see him, to be with him? Was that possible from across a great distance?

* * * *

THE VILLAGERS not only welcomed Ammey, they allowed her help. Crops were being planted and everyone helped, even the children. Liani and Catherin were Ammey's constant companions. When it was time for the mid-day break, they played with her hair or rested beside her, depending on how tired they were.

Ammey had never experienced village life. There was a lack of privacy, which was disconcerting at first, but there was also a sense of community, which was interesting and comforting. Days turned into weeks and it was with a jolt of shock that she looked up one evening and saw the moon was three-quarters full.

She went to Graybil's lodge to speak with him, but it was dark and quiet, and she didn't wish to disturb them. When she saw him in the field the next morning, she went to him. "Graybil—"

He studied her face. "What is it?"

She noticed Ianthe straighten from a short distance away, one hand pressed against the small of her back, one shielding the sun from her eyes. Ammey chewed on her bottom lip. What she had to say would certainly not make her more liked by the woman. "Are you well?" Ammey hedged.

"What is it, Ammey?" Graybil repeated quietly. He could feel both her need and reluctance to tell him something.

"Before we left Draven, I was told you were to return by the next full moon," she admitted reluctantly. She felt terrible. He was content here, Ianthe was happy, and Liani needed her father.

"Who told you this?"

"Ulima. Forzenay told her."

Ianthe was coming toward them, concerned about whatever communication was passing between them. Graybil looked toward his wife with a sigh. "What else did she say?" he asked as he watched her approach.

"She was told one of their lives depended upon your return."

He looked back at her, frowning now. "You should have told me this before."

"Ulima said not to. She said to let you rest and mend."

Ianthe reached them, a sack of seed draped over her shoulder. "Anything wrong?" she asked suspiciously.

"I have to return to Draven," Graybil said calmly.

Ianthe was agitated as she turned an angry frown on Ammey. "What did you say to him?"

"She passed on a message as she'd promised to do," Graybil said in a stern voice. "That's all."

Ianthe turned and stalked away, angry and not bothering to hide it. Ammey felt the stares of everyone around her, curious about what had transpired.

"Are you coming, too?" Graybil asked.

She shook her head. "I was told not to, and that you would not want to."

He sighed. "It's time I stayed home. I'll have to tell them." "But you'll go?"

He looked cross. "Of course, I'll go."

Ammey nodded, then turned and walked off, feeling that she'd displeased everyone. And she was stuck here for the time being.

* * * *

AMMEY PULLED A BLANKET around her and sat in a chair. She drew her legs up in front of her and stared into the flames in her hearth. The knock on her door startled her and, even before she could respond, the door cracked open. It was Ianthe. "May I come in?"

"Of course," Ammey replied, starting to get up.

"Don't get up." Ianthe stepped in and closed the door behind her. "It turned cold tonight."

"Yes."

Ianthe moved closer.

"Please, sit," Ammey said.

Ianthe pulled over a chair and sat next to her, also facing the fire. It was obvious something was on her mind. "I was rude this morning," she finally uttered. "Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, Ianthe. I understand how you feel."

"Do you?"

"Of course. There are those I miss so badly," Ammey replied. "My home, my family ... friends—"

"He's promised to come back for good," Ianthe said. "Do you think he will?"

"Yes. If he's promised it, he will. He has honor. They all have great honor."

Ianthe lowered the hood of her cloak. "What are they like?"

Ammey smiled. "They're all different. But they're all good men."

Ianthe shook her head. "The assassins of Azulland," she said wryly. "So feared and yet good, decent men. People have no idea."

"No, they don't."

"That they love," Ianthe continued. "That they are loved."

Ammey felt her face heat. "They care deeply for one another. They're very protective."

"I know. Closer than most brothers. Flynn has shared at least that much."

"That's why he has to go back," Ammey explained, turning to her. "One of their lives depends upon it."

"But he's done enough," Ianthe said passionately.

"You're right, he has. His place is here."

Ianthe stared at the Ammey, regret etched in the lines of her face. "I disliked you on sight because of your beauty. I am sorry for that."

"You've been nothing but good to me, Ianthe."

"The girls," Ianthe said. "You're all they talk about. They pretend to be you. And my husband has not helped matters, talking about your skill with the sword, the sparring with Vincent."

Ammey smiled. "It was mostly play."

"Will you go back to them?"

Ammey's smiled faded. "I don't know. I was told to bring Graybil back here, and that I was not to return with him when he went. That's all I know."

"You are welcome here," Ianthe said. "Please know that." "Thank you."

Ianthe got to her feet. "I should go. I'll see you tomorrow."

* * * *

AMMEY SLEPT POORLY and was up before dawn. She had missed seeing the others off in Draven, she did want to miss saying farewell to Graybil.

"You should go back to a warm bed," he said when he saw her. He was hitching the cart to his horse to return to Xavier.

"I wanted to say goodbye."

"I'm coming back," he replied quickly. "I'll do what I can in Draven or Shilbridge or wherever they need me but then I'm coming back."

"I know."

He looked at her a moment, trying to judge her reaction.

"Your place is here," Ammey said.

He nodded and went back to hitching the cart.

"Can I help?"

"It's done." He stepped back. "Any messages you'd like passed on?"

She thought about it; then shook her head. "Can you believe I miss them?" she said, trying to be light.

"I miss them, too," he admitted. "And when I'm elsewhere, I miss this," he glanced toward his lodge.

She nodded, understanding.

"I'll return as soon as I can," he pledged.

"Be careful and fare well."

He walked a few steps closer. "May I ask that you watch over them?" he asked quietly.

She was touched by his trust. "It would be my honor."

He nodded, then walked to his horse, mounted and rode out. There was a burning tension in the pit of his stomach, and he had to fight the inclination to turn and look one last time at the village. He kept going, reasoning that it was merely a lack of proper rest plaguing his mind. Ianthe had spent much of the night weeping, and it had cost them both sleep. It wasn't as if he'd never see his home again. He would do what he had to do and then he would return for good. If the 'Five' had to be kept intact, Ammey McKeaf was both willing and able. He would have never imagined that a woman could be one of their number, but she'd convinced him otherwise. She'd convinced them all.

"WHAT IS THAT?" a woman called in a panic.

Ammey sat up. She'd been lying on the ground, resting during the mid-day break. She followed the horrified gaze of the woman but she was already filled with trepidation. Men were coming, dozens of men, wearing the black armor of Bellux-Abry. She'd never seen soldiers of Bellux-Abry before so it was queer how quickly she recognized them and the very real danger they posed.

She got to her feet and turned her head left and right, searching for Ianthe and Liani. She'd sworn to protect them, and they were nowhere to be seen. "Ianthe! Liani," she yelled. She took off in a dead run for the Graybil lodge. Ianthe appeared at the door and Ammey ran for her, praying Liani was there, too. She didn't have to look back at the approaching riders to know they were getting close. She knew it from the way the ground shook, from the way men had begun calling out and women had begun screaming.

Ianthe was terrified. Ammey could see it in her face.

"Where is Liani?" Ammey called, but the girl appeared behind her mother before she'd finished asking the question. "Is there a hiding place, a tunnel? They may burn the village."

Ianthe shook her head. "N-no."

"Have you a sword?" Ammey demanded.

"Yes!" Ianthe dashed back into the lodge for it.

"Hurry! Come, Liani," Ammey insisted, taking her hand and pulling.

"Mama!"

There was so much screaming, but the chaos was a blessing of sorts. Ianthe came running with the bulky sword and Ammey took it from her. She remembered the caves that surrounded the lake. It would be a perfect hideout, if they could get there. "To the falls," she called.

Ianthe gawked at a man on horseback bearing down on them. Ammey placed both hands on the hilt of the sword and turned to face him. "Go!" she ordered Ianthe. "Don't stop!"

The man came off his horse and advanced on her, his blade drawn and dripping with blood. He tossed off his helmet, amused by the lovely chit's bravado.

"Certain you want to do that?" Ammey challenged.

He smiled and lunged playfully, to judge her skill. "Oh, I won't kill you."

She jumped back. "No?" Without warning, she whirled about, lifted then brought the sword down upon his head, splitting it in two. She was running again before he'd even fallen.

She saw an unarmed villager struck and knocked backwards with a spiked flail. The village was only a hundred strong, and that included old and very young. They had no chance of fighting off these trained killers.

She spotted Ianthe ahead. She was carrying her daughter and it had slowed her. A rider was closing in on them. He reached them, came off his horse and wrapped a rope around Ianthe's neck, jerking her backwards. Screams and cries escalated all around her until Ammey could hear nothing else. She added her own to the din, never slowing as she came at the man. She ran him through, withdrew the sword, then

watched in disbelief as he turned to her. He took one step and she struck again, cutting across his chest.

"Do not carry her," Ammey ordered Ianthe breathlessly.

"Take her hand, pull her, but do not carry her." She cut the rope that led to Ianthe's neck, but not so closely that Ianthe wasn't left wearing a garish necklace.

Ammey went for the dead man's horse, clicking with her mouth and moving slowly. The horse was battle trained and she retrieved it easily.

Ianthe was shaking all over. She was so frightened that her bowels felt dangerously loose. Ammey brought the horse to her and helped her up, then handed her Liani. "Go!"

They took off and Ammey went to the dead man, turning him over to see what weapons he possessed. He had a short axe. She tested its feel in her hand, but discarded it. She'd trained with sword, daggers, the lance and bows of all kind but never with an axe. He also had a sword, but she wasn't capable of using two at once.

Men were bearing down on her, two from one direction and at least one from another. If only she had a horse. She glanced backwards and saw no sign of Ianthe and Liani. *Please, let them have gotten away,* she prayed.

She was registering everything at once, lodges burning, dead bodies on the ground, women roped in a line, some boys, as well. There was the dreadful sound of agony, not from the injured, for the wolves of Bellux-Abry had left none alive. This agony was from the living.

"Drop that before someone gets hurt," the first of the wolves ordered as he came off his horse.

"Before you get hurt, you mean," she returned, backing up with both hands on the sword.

"Did you kill him?" one of the men asked, referring to the dead man at her feet.

"She did," another called. "I saw it."

"Kill her now," a man yelled.

"No, not yet," another called.

Ammey continued to back up. *Please, please let them have gotten away.*

Two more men came off their horses and edged toward her, and three or four came riding in to watch the spectacle.

"One girl holds off seven men?" one of the newcomers sneered.

"How many of us do you think you can take on?" one of the approachers mocked.

"All of you, if you had the honor to fight one at a time."

"Oh, you'll take us all, girl. Though not in the way you mean."

"We don't have time for this. Get her and keep her alive," a man ordered before turning his horse around and riding off. Another one or two followed him.

"Almost got away," a man called from some distance behind her.

"Bring her," the leader called as he rode.

Ammey's heart pounded sickeningly. The first voice had come from the gorge. She turned quickly and saw what she'd most dreaded, a man roughly handling Ianthe. Failure! It burned like fire, scorching her from the inside. She turned and swung the sword with a primal scream, slicing through all

three men who had come off their mounts. She jumped on the closest horse, ignoring the shouts and furious pursuit behind her. All that mattered was getting to Ianthe and saving her for Graybil. She had promised.

The soldier who'd recaptured Ianthe was off his horse, securing her with rope again. Ammey fought the instincts of the stallion, forcing the animal into a direct collision with the man. Then she doubled back and grabbed Ianthe, all the while keeping the horse in motion. "Where's Liani?" she cried.

"Got away—"

Ammey felt the muscles in her arm and shoulder burn, but she stayed low and held on.

"They're coming!" Ianthe cried. The men were practically on top of them.

Ammey kept her focus on the mouth of the gorge. She had to make it there and they had a chance. "Hang on," she warned when they were close. "Get to the gorge. I'm jumping." Ianthe grabbed the horse's neck and saddle and Ammey jumped off, swinging her blade for effect. She felt her left ankle give beneath her as she landed, but she came up, blade higher than her head, strengthened emotionally by the rock walls that surrounded her. She'd made it there. If Ianthe would keep going, she could get away. *Please, please, please,* she silently begged the gods. She'd managed to stop the riders for the moment and that felt like victory. Ianthe just had to make into the water.

"You're dead, now," one swore.

Her ankle throbbed a burning pain up her leg. "Not quite yet," she snapped.

"She's hurt," another said, coming off his horse. "Look how pale."

She extended her blade. "Even so," she said, weakly.

They rushed her at once. She swung, missed, and felt herself falling—no, being lifted.

"She's cut," one of them shouted.

She was suddenly light, floating. She was vaguely aware of her reality. She'd been thrown onto her stomach over a horse. The movement hurt and she felt a wetness of blood down her arm and side and pain in her ankle.

"Gift for Corin," someone called.

"She took out five men!" another shouted. "Give her to me!"

"No!"

"Kill her."

* * * *

SOFT FINGERS caressed her face. Her head was on something soft. Ammey woke and looked up into Catherin's pale face. It was dark, pitch dark, except for the light of a nearby fire. She looked around, but Catherin held up a finger to her lips, warning her to be quiet. "They want to kill you," the child whispered. "They want you awake to hurt you."

Ammey felt hands around her lower leg. "Your ankle is bad," a boy said.

Ammey looked down at fourteen-year old Nasim. He was the same age as Nicolas. They would have been friends. What did these terrible men want with Nasim, or with any of them?

"But Athalia said the bone wasn't broken," he explained. "She put a mud poultice on it to cool it and she bound it to keep it straight," he explained. "Your cuts have stopped bleeding. They weren't too bad."

"Is she awake?" a woman whispered. The voice belonged to Kira, a young mother newly married to a strapping young man named Cyrus. She had long, auburn hair and a sprinkling of freckles across her fair skin. Kira moved in and supported Ammey so she could drink. "They've given us water," she said. "That's all."

"Where's your baby?" Ammey whispered.

"I hid her. I hid her," Kira said, beginning to cry.

"Cyrus?"

"They killed him." Kira's voice was thick with pain. "For no reason. He wasn't resisting."

Ammey looked up at the stars, wondering how they could be so glorious after such atrocity. She allowed the tears to flow. What did it matter now? What did anything matter?

"She'll die," Kira moaned softly.

"No," Ammey said, struggling to sit. Hands restrained her and she felt a trickle of blood from her side. She fought off a wave of dizziness. "Ianthe?"

"They didn't find her or Liani," Nasim said. "They're not here."

Ammey felt relief flood through her. Ianthe and Liani had evaded Corin's wolves. "They got to the caves," she said to Kira. "Ianthe will find the baby and care for her."

Kira was too stunned to speak for a moment. "You're certain?"

"Yes."

Kira began crying, this time from a resurgence of hope. "Ammey McKeaf," she uttered reverently. "You killed those men."

"The others," Nasim warned. "They mean to kill you."

"We all die, Nasim," Ammey said, feeling more peace than despair with the knowledge that she'd made a difference. It was highly possible that she'd saved Ianthe, Liani and Kira's child. "What's your daughter's name?" she asked Kira.

"Alea," Kira replied, drying the tears from Ammey's face with her sleeve.

"It's a lovely name," Ammey murmured, closing her eyes.

Catherin looked up at Kira, frightened about what would happen to Ammey, and Kira bent and kissed the girl's head, determined to protect her all she could.

Ammey was drifting again, comforted by the realization that her father, brothers and Vincent knew where she was. They would search for her until they discovered the truth. They would be stricken with grief at first, of course, but when that passed, they would be proud. They would know she'd been courageous and strong. They would be proud.

* * * *

THE MEN of the eighth wolf pack passed around bottles of ale they'd taken from the village, drinking each time they got hold of one. They'd finished the venison they'd roasted, all but the marrow, and the bones were being cracked open and sucked as they reclined around the campfire. They were glad to be headed back home to their own hearths and women,

especially having been successful at all they'd been bidden to do.

"Nothing impresses him," Aban spoke up, picking up the conversation where they'd left it.

"How could it?" another slurred. "A king has everything. What could impress him?"

"Xerxes head on a stick; that impressed him," One-eye spoke up.

"The traitor Vhord being delivered alive."

"Oh, and the women of ... where was it? The dark haired wenches they made dance and—"

"Fephek," another breathed out, recalling the orgy the women had been commanded to perform on one another for the entertainment of the men. That was, until some of the men couldn't restrain themselves any longer and jumped up on the platform to participate.

Aban sat up. "She might entertain him," he said, nodding toward the captives they had pinioned in a group.

"The warrior princess?"

"She killed six of our men," Chale spoke up, determined that the woman die soon, slowly, and at their hands.

"Think of it," Aban said. "We clean her up; dress her in one of Eskarne's costumes, one that reveals more skin than silk. Perhaps we even give her a weapon, a dull dagger or a long sword."

"Call her the dangerous vixen of Daleog," someone said.

"The wild thing of Daleog," another called out. "Whose eyes transfix before she strikes at the speed of a shooting star."

Aban was getting more and more enthused by the idea. "We present her in chains, announce her crimes, and have Corin do what he will."

"It might amuse him."

"It would."

"He could keep her captive and torture her for days."

"Or he might return her to us," One-eye said to Chale, who was scowling darkly. That seemed a more likely prospect. That's what he did with most female captives presented to him. After all, how many females did one man need? He had an entire wing of the palace filled with the most beautiful and exotic women who existed only to please him.

"We have to feed them tomorrow," someone spoke up.
"Yes," Aban agreed. "It's still a long march."

* * * *

THE PRISONERS were ordered on their feet and marched in the morning. Ammey was not excluded or singled out in any way. It was a surprise to all, but a good one. Her ankle sent a shot of pain up her leg with every step, despite the fact that her fellow prisoners took turns helping to support her weight until a decent walking stick was found.

At midday, they were allowed to rest and eat. The tasteless gruel and hardtack was the worst meal Ammey had ever eaten, but it helped allay the pain of hunger. Afterwards, they were ordered back up and marched until nearly dark, at which time they fell into fatigued sleep on the cold, hard ground. The pattern was the same the next day and the next and the next.

* * * *

"HE WANTS TO GO HUNTING," Salvo Voreskae exclaimed as he paced across the marble floor of the throne room.

"So?" Nafino Zephyr snarled. Voreskae was always getting worked about something, usually something that amounted to less than a thick glob of spit.

"A long hunting trip through Uerad," Voreskae said slowly.

"What is it you're fretting about like an old woman?"

"Yes," Marko Corin spoke up. He'd entered silently through a side passage and listened for a moment. "What is it you worry over and conspire about?"

"Sire," Voreskae said, bowing deeply from the waist.

Zephyr bowed, as well, though not as deeply. "There is no conspiracy."

"We're merely concerned—" Voreskae began explaining.

"You're concerned," Zephyr interrupted, scowling at Voreskae.

"I'm concerned," Voreskae tried again, "because some of our men have not returned, as expected."

Corin walked further in the room and sat in his chair, noting it was slightly warm from having been used recently. He glanced at Nafino Zephyr, who was occupied staring at Voreskae. "Whom would that be?" Corin asked.

"The men of the third," Voreskae replied. "And Gilley, who was to have returned with them."

Corin looked away for a moment to remain his composure. It was no secret that Voreskae and Gilley were drawn to one

another in an obvious and unnatural relationship. Personally, he did not care, so long as it was not flaunted in his face.

"I feel certain there's no need for concern," Zephyr said. "Do you?" Marko asked.

Zephry looked at him quizzically. He was behaving oddly these last few days. "Are you quite alright?"

"Give me the details of this military strategy we've embarked on," Corin barked.

"We've been over it," Zephyr, commonly referred to as Zino, replied in a quiet, measured tone.

"Go over it again," Marko replied coldly. These men were his closest advisors, but too often lately, they forgot their place. Or was it that they coveted his?

Voreskae glanced at Zino and then back at Corin. "We've annexed our closest neighbors and will annex Shilbridge next," he explained respectfully.

"Annex," Marko said slowly. Did they think he was that much of a fool? "Go on."

"And we've divisions out making our strength known," Zephyr added.

"How?"

"Various ways. This way, they'll fear the very name of Bellux-Abry and Marko Corin, even before we face the prospect of battle. It may be that we won't even need to fight for control when the time comes. They'll hand it over."

Zino had it all figured out. It was infuriating that he wasn't consulted first. "I wish to hunt on the morrow," Corin stated. "Arrange it."

"Yes, sire," Voreskae said. "I shall. At once." He bowed, backed a few steps and then left the room.

"What aren't you telling me?" Corin asked Zino.

"You are privy to every important decision. Naturally, many of the moves within the implementation of that decision are withheld. They lack importance and can be unpleasant to hear. And when the ends justify the means, why dwell on them?"

Marko frowned, wondering how Zino had a neat and logical answer for everything and yet he never felt more informed once presented with the answers. Why was that irritating him so, as of late? "I want to leave tomorrow, first thing."

"As you wish," Zino said easily. "Is there anything I can arrange in the meantime to allay your boredom?"

"I wish I could say there were."

* * * *

KIDDER HAD DONE so well blending in at Shilbridge tavern, he was close to invisible, but the bit of information he'd just overheard had practically knocked the wind from him. It took a few minutes to extricate himself without being noticed and then he headed directly to the camp they'd made on the edge of town. Forzenay stood out too much for some towns, for this town, so he was stuck waiting for the others to learn what they could. For Forzenay, there was no more frustrating state of being.

Kidder rode in and dismounted quickly. "There's a plan to destroy Daleog," he blurted.

Forzenay stood, feeling the full implication of the words.

"And all divisions are pushing back toward the city," Kidder continued. "—probably for the next siege. And there's concern regarding where Gilley and the third are."

Forzenay didn't have to look up at the moon, visible even in the waning daylight hours. He knew it was full. He knew what it meant. "Get the others. We ride out tonight."

"For where?"

"I ordered Graybil back."

"Back?"

"To Draven. He'll be there, or on his way there. I didn't know what was to happen."

"And Ammey?"

Forzenay shook his head and Kidder turned and hurried off. Forzenay hung his head, burdened by the newly acquired intelligence. What kind of a leader ordered a man one place while his home and family were being destroyed? He hadn't known, not fully known, but should he have? Should he have pushed for answers?

He went to his pack in search of the talisman Milainah had gifted him with many seasons ago. Why had he never used it? He didn't feel he was above the use of mystic ways. How often had he relied on the seidhkona?

He found the talisman and held it up by its long leather cord, inspecting the strange symbols on the flat, black stone. He hung it around his neck. You said one of our lives depended upon Graybil's return, he prayed silently. Was the life his own?

The talisman began to grow warm on his chest. He looked down and discovered it was no longer black; it was silver and

it had depth. It suddenly resembled an eye. The answer was yes. The life saved was Graybil's own.

But at the expense of his home and family? His wife and child? Forzenay felt his heart was being torn from his chest? What he done? The choice should have been Graybil's. And if they'd known what was to happen, they could have been there. They could have helped.

"You would have fought valiantly, and you would have died there," Milainah said.

Forzenay whirled around to find her, but she was nowhere in sight. "Milainah?"

"All of you," she said, her voice further away.

"Milainah!"

* * * *

HOW MANY DAYS they'd been going, Ammey did not know. What she did know was that the Blue Mountains loomed in front of them and a dense woods was not far off to the east. Most everyone's bonds had grown loose with wear and from having grown thinner from a lack of food. Not hers, of course. They'd bound her unmercifully tight as punishment.

They had stopped early so the soldiers could construct caged carts to transport them by. It was not for the sake of mercy, it was so that the trip would go faster. And probably for the presentation value for when they were driven through the streets of Bellux-Abry.

"Can you get your hands free?" Ammey asked Nasim.

He looked surprised, then began wriggling and working them. "I think so." His wrists were bleeding, but many of their wrists were.

"The ones who are not busy building are busy drinking," Ammey said. "And the woods are so close."

He nodded and worked harder at getting out of his bonds.

* * * *

HABAH YOR HAD had his eye on the dark haired girl. He'd always had a dark fascination with children, usually boys, but she had captured his interest days ago. He'd held off, but now they had stopped early and he had the whole evening to fill. He looked around, discovered he wasn't being watched by anyone and approached the group of prisoners looking for the child. He finally spotted her sleeping, her head on the lap of the yellow-haired captive who had caused so many problems. Personally, he would have opted to snap her neck.

Ammey saw him coming and she felt a sick sense of dread. He was a large brute of a man and he'd been watching Catherin in a way that made her flesh crawl. Ammey had been planning to ask Nasim to take Catherin with him, but he hadn't worked his hands free yet. What was she supposed to do with her hands bound and with no weapon?

Habah planted his feet where he wished, kicking or stepping on anyone that got in his way, his eyes trained only on the little prize he'd been thinking of for days.

Ammey set Catherin aside. He was almost to them. He was to them, although he ignored her as he reached for the girl. "Wait," she begged, but he did no more than snarl and shove

her aside. She leapt up and jumped on his back, wrapping her bound hands around his thick neck and pulling with all her might. The move caught him off guard. He rose up to deal with her, but someone tripped him, and he stumbled and fell backwards, landing squarely on top of Ammey. She couldn't breathe from the force of the blow and his weight, but she had her hands around his throat. She had the power to kill him. She had to believe that.

The pain in her raw wrists was blinding, but she pulled with all her might, picturing nothing but his life force draining from him. *Picture it*, Vincent had drilled into her. *Picture your attacker dead*. She was aware that other prisoners had moved in and begun assailing him with kicks and stomps to his groin, but her job was to crush his airway; until her strength gave out or her hands were sliced from her wrists, which felt like it was happening.

There was such noise. Was it only from the blood pounding in her head? No, it was men's voices, shouting. Women were being knocked out of the way. Suddenly, the faces of the soldiers loomed in front of her.

"She's killed another," Chale said in a cold, stunned fury.
"I said we should kill her!" Habah was an overly robust six and half feet tall. How had she done it? Yet he was staring out sightlessly, his meaty face a ghastly white, his lips blue and open. "Now, you die," Chale swore, as he reached for Ammey and hauled her to her feet.

"He was after the child," a woman cried out. A soldier hit her in the face and knocked her backwards.

"Wait," Aban argued, as Chale pulled Ammey away. "Stop. Habah was—"

"It does not matter what *he* was," Chale retorted, shaking with fury. "You," he hissed into Ammey's ear, "are going to be pulled apart, limb from limb. How lovely do you think you'll be then?"

He was forcing her toward his horse and she couldn't stop him.

Aban followed, holding up his arms to dissuade the others from joining in the execution. "She's our gift to the king!"

"I want three riders on their horses," Chale yelled, as he reached for the rope from his own pack. "I want her pulled apart!"

No one moved, torn between the power struggle of these two men, each from powerful families, each of higher rank than theirs.

"That's Corin's decision to make," Aban argued fiercely.

Chale, incensed that no one had come forward, decided to take matters into his own hands. Aban would not castrate him in front of these men or anyone one else, ever. He wrapped the rope around the prisoner's bound hands.

"What are you doing?" Aban asked, coming at him.

Chale mounted his horse quickly and took off, dragging Ammey behind him.

"Damn him!" Aban shouted. He would drag her to her death and there was nothing he or anyone could do to stop him. He turned away, refusing to watch it.

"Corin," someone said.

Aban was burning with hatred for the hotheaded Chale. "It's too late," he yelled.

"No! It's him!"

Aban whirled back and saw the black and silver banners. A party, headed by the king himself, had just come over the crest of a hill and Chale, the fool, had ridden right into them. But perhaps Corin would feel Chale was right. Aban went for his horse and rode to reach them.

* * * *

IT WAS THE SHOCK on Chale's face that first alerted the hunting party that something was amiss. Beyond him was a camp of their own men and prisoners, mostly women. With his eyes, Corin followed the rope in Chale's hand to the body of a woman being dragged behind him. He got off his horse, curious, and walked forward.

"Sire," Chale said, also coming off his horse. He looked down and saw the once wild captive was dead, and dropped the rope.

Corin reached the woman and dropped to one knee, awed by her beauty, even in death. There were faded bruises around her neck, fresher bruises on her face, and a gash in her head was bleeding where it had struck something, probably a rock. He reached out and touched her still-warm throat. He concentrated to be certain. "There's a heart beat still," he announced.

Aban reached them. He came off his horse and knelt on her other side. "She should not have been killed," he announced.

Corin looked up at him and then at Chale, who was glaring at Aban. "Why?" he asked Chale.

"She killed six of our number that we know of," he spoke up to justify his action. "She felled three at one time and she killed another a short time ago, with her hands bound."

Corin looked down at the beauty, impressed. "How does a creature such as this best six of my *wolves*?"

No one spoke for a moment.

"I simply must know that," Corin said, standing. "Cut her loose." He watched as Aban cut her hands free, revealing bruised and bloodied wrists. It was likely they'd be scarred for life.

"We were going to make her a gift to you," Aban said.

"I accept." Corin waved to his surgeon. "Put her in the wagon," he said to Aban. "Tend to her wounds." He turned to Chale. "The prisoners? Who are they?"

"They're from the village of Daleog. For the slave market."

"Daleog?" Corin muttered. That was in central Azulland.

"Why there?"

"Zephyr's orders."

Corin felt a rush of cold fury. So much for being apprised of every important decision. Or was this the unpleasant means to the ends Zino had referred to? "Return to the city," he ordered.

"Yes, sire. We were on our way."

Corin stalked off, passing Aban as he went. "Wait," he said, stopping him.

"Your majesty?"

"How did she kill a man with her hands bound?"

"She choked him to death."

Corin considered this. "Was he attacking her?"

Aban hesitated, "No. He was after a child,"

Corin cocked his head slowly. "A child?"

Aban nodded. "Yes, sire. He had a weakness for the young."

Corin swallowed. The thought made him queasy. "How young was the child?"

"I don't know, sire. Eight or nine years, perhaps."

Corin looked to where his surgeon was attending the woman. "She tried to intervene?"

"She did intervene, sire."

"Yes, I suppose she did. And nearly paid with her life."

"She may still," Aban said. In his opinion, the woman would die. "Of course, there was the matter of the others."

"Three at once?" Corin asked, shaking his head.

"She's quite something with the sword."

"I'll consider myself warned, being in the company of such a dangerous creature and all," Corin said sardonically as he walked back to his horse. "Who knows? Even unconscious she may take a few of us out," he jested to the amusement of his party.

Chale glared at Aban, who glared right back. Neither of them felt confident of their standing with the king.

* * * *

THE INSTANT SMILE that lit Graybil's face upon seeing his friends faded as he studied their expressions. "You look nearly as pale as a white man," he said to Forzenay.

"We've got to go," Forzenay returned.

"You can't rest up?" Xavier asked, getting to his feet.

Graybil was already on his feet. "What is it?"

"We just learned of a plan to sack and destroy Daleog."

Graybil felt his blood run cold. "We've got nothing worth pillaging," he rasped.

Forzenay reeled as a terrible realization hit. The purpose of destroying Daleog was to kill Graybil, who, by all rights, should have been there. The seidhkona had known. The dark force knew who they were and was making an effort to end their lives. He closed his eyes. *Is it true?*

Vincent, who had walked into the room, glanced back at Forzenay, before turning to him fully, bewildered by what he was seeing. Forzenay had closed his eyes and flattened his hand against an amulet, which was turning a lighter color before his very eyes.

Graybil narrowed his eyes at the same sight and Kidder and Stripe hurried forward to see what the others were witnessing. The amulet became an unholy looking eye looking out at them.

Forzenay opened his eyes. "They know who we are."

"Who?" Vincent demanded, alarmed by what he'd seen.

"The dark force. They will try and kill us."

"My village would be destroyed to get at me?" Graybil asked, his tone somewhere between disbelief and fear.

"Let's go," Kidder urged.

"When is it to happen?" Graybil asked, his voice rising.

"Let's go," Stripe exclaimed, heading for the door.

The others followed with grim faces and heavy hearts.

Ulima came into the room. "I thought I heard—" The sight of her husband silenced her. "What's happened?"

"Oh, Ulima," Xavier replied, sitting back down. "It's bad."

* * * *

SOME OF THE LODGES had burned, but not all. There were many blackened piles of stone and timber where lodges had been, but there was no smoke and no sign of life. "It happened days ago," Stripe said.

The Five came off their horses and began looking around for any sign of life. A sheep peeked out from around a building and they all turned toward it.

"Hello?" Vincent called out. "Is anyone here?"

Graybil's own lodge was still standing. He walked toward it numbly. The door cracked open—or was it his imagination or perhaps the wind? It opened wider and Ianthe stood there with a babe in her arms. She looked as bemused as he. He nearly dropped to his knees in gratitude and shock, but somehow he made it to her.

Forzenay also felt like dropping to his knees. Only Kidder was smiling, the rest were too stunned.

"Papa!" Liani said, running at him from inside the lodge. She stopped herself just before she leapt. "Is your belly still hurt?"

He couldn't speak. He just opened his arms and held them all, including baby Alea, who'd begun howling. "You're alive," he finally managed. "You're alive!"

Other people crept out once they recognized Graybil. This time the greetings were somber. These people were wounded, physically and emotionally.

Vincent kept looking around to catch sight of Ammey, all the while knowing she was not there. He could *feel* she was not there. She exuded a life force he always felt before he saw her. She was not there—but she was not dead. He would know if she was dead.

The Five gravitated to Graybil's lodge to learn what had happened. Ianthe sat next to her husband, holding his hand, and Liani sat in his lap. Kidder took charge of the baby and gently jostled her to sleep.

"They came without warning in the middle of the day," Ianthe reported in a flat voice. She shook her head, recalling the horror. "Nineteen were killed. They took nearly thirty captive."

"Ammey?" Forzenay asked.

"They took her."

"She saved us," Liani said to her father.

"More than once," Ianthe added, lifting her chin a bit.

"What happened?" Vincent asked. He had to know.

Ianthe shook her head, wondering how to make sense of such chaos. "We were running, trying to get to the caves, and we were close," Ianthe said. "But a man—"

"He put a rope about mama," Liani said, frowning at the memory.

"Ammey fought off a man before that," Ianthe said. "And killed him so that we could get away. And then men surrounded her."

Vincent felt his chest constrict.

Kidder looked down at the soft, sweet mouth of the babe. She was making a sucking motion as she slept. He wanted to think of anything except Ammey being hurt by a group of animal-like men. Ammey—whom they should have protected.

"When she saw—" Ianthe continued. "I fear I can't explain it well, but—"

"She had a sword," Liani said reverently. "She swung it and killed three men at one time, papa. I saw it! And then she took their horse and she ran at the man who had mama, and she hit him with the horse and she grabbed her up."

"Liani had made to the gorge, but came back out," Ianthe explained. "Which she knows she should not have."

Liani looked at her father, trying to gage his reaction. "I went back when I saw Ammey get Mama."

"We made it to the mouth of the gorge and Ammey jumped off," Ianthe continued. "So many men were riding at us, bearing down on us. I kept going, Ammey insisted, and Liani and I made it to the water. We swam into the caves and stayed until dark."

"Did they say where they were taking the captives?" Stripe asked.

"I don't know," Ianthe replied.

"Where would they go?" Kidder asked softly.

Vincent had heard enough. He walked outside to get some air. The others stewed in their own thoughts until Forzenay got up and followed Vincent.

"We have to go after her," Vincent declared.

"We're less than a day's ride from Vihlae," Forzenay reminded him.

"Vihlae is in the opposite direction of Bellux-Abry," Vincent snapped. "Besides which, I'm not certain I want to see the seidh again," he said bitterly. "Why didn't they tell us? Why?"

Graybil stepped outside. He was watching the exchange between the men when Stripe joined him. "Half my village gone," Graybil said. "Because of me."

"If we think like that, we're lost," Stripe replied. "There are men responsible for this and it is not you."

Graybil sighed. "I was prepared to help whichever of you needed help and then I was coming back home to stay."

Stripe looked at his friend. "I understand."

Kidder stepped out of the lodge, closing the door silently.

"You're good with babies," Stripe said.

"It's a gift," Kidder replied. "If you ever need me to rock you to sleep—"

Stripe chuckled. Even Graybil grinned. No one would ever, fully understand how he would miss these men.

"I've been thinking about the sequence of events," Kidder began slowly. "The seidhkona warns us correctly about Ghlaxmire. Saves our lives. Then we were told when to get to Draven, and that Ammey would help."

Stripe nodded. "She foretells that one of us would be injured badly enough that they should be returned to their village," he mused.

"And that Ammey alone was to bring me," Graybil said.

"But not return with you," Kidder said significantly. "You were told to return to save one of our lives, which turns out to be *your* life."

"I see what you're getting at," Stripe said. "You're thinking it was meant for Ammey to have been taken." He suddenly bolted forward to where Vincent and Forzenay were talking. The others quickly followed. "Forzenay—" Both Forzenay and Vincent turned toward him. "After we saw the seidhkona, you said there was hope. You said something about one that would make a difference."

Kidder nodded, recalling the conversation well. "We asked if it was one of us and you said no."

"No," Graybil said quietly. "What he said was, 'it is not one of our Five.'"

Vincent turned to Forzenay, his heart in this throat. "It's her?"

"It is," Graybil exclaimed. "It's Ammey, isn't it? That's why she was to be here."

"She's the one to make a difference?" Kidder asked.

"Yes," Forzenay said quietly. "She is the one."

Vincent swallowed hard, suddenly queasy.

Kidder shook his head. "To make a difference with whom?" Forzenay shook his head. "I was not told."

"She's an innocent," Stripe declared, feeling unaccountably angry. "We taught her to kill. We did that! I'd wager my life she's a virgin."

Vincent was hot and cold at once. He could feel his heart pounding sickeningly at the thought of Ammey being violated.

"How can she make a difference in a war?" Graybil spoke up. "Surrounded by men like these?"

"We should have returned her to the Forge," Stripe declared.

"Is she alive?" Vincent asked. He had to know for certain.

Forzenay took off the talisman and offered it to Vincent.

Vincent stared uncomprehendly. "What am I to do with it?"

"It's never to be used lightly," Forzenay said in a low voice. "Only to ask a question that can be answered. Something you seek to know with all your heart."

Vincent accepted it and put it around his neck.

"It should lay against the flesh that covers your heart,"
Forzenay said, repeating what he had been told. "You needn't ask your question aloud."

Vincent closed his eyes and tried to clear his mind and concentrate, but countless flashes of images and feelings came at him—the way she felt in his arms as he held her. Her flashing green eyes. The feeling of her lips on his. Her seductive dancing that night in Tariq's lodge. That bastard's hands on her throat.

"She lives," Milainah said.

Vincent jerked his eyes open. The others were staring at him.

"What?" Kidder asked. "What did you ask? It turned silver," he exclaimed, pointing at the talisman.

"Did you hear her?" Vincent asked.

"Who?" Stripe asked.

"Milainah!"

Forzenay shook his head. "It's only in the mind of the wearer."

Vincent turned from the others and walked away. This time he was able to concentrate as he silently asked, *Should we go after her*? He waited, but there was nothing. No voice, no change of color from the stone. "Should we go after her?" he asked aloud.

Nothing.

He turned back to Forzenay, frowning. "Why isn't it working?"

"It is," Forzenay replied quietly. "The answer is no."

CHAPTER 5: Martyr of Daleog

AMMEY REALIZED that had it not been for the water mill, she would have been very impatient indeed, but she'd always loved watching it. As a young girl, she'd fantasized about riding the paddles up and around. Of course, the one time she'd actually tried it, Anthony had caught her, grabbed her off the wheel, forced her squirming body across his lap and spanked her mercilessly.

With her pride injured and her back side on fire, she'd screamed and wanted to kill him. She'd been planning on telling her father straighaway but, instead, Anthony, nearly seventeen at the time, dragged her in and did the informing. She'd been six. Her father had listened, despite her screaming, and concluded, "Had he not tanned your hide, my girl, I would have."

It was the beginning of a short-lived war with her eldest brother. She gave it up only when it was apparent she could not win because of their age difference. But one day, she told herself, she'd be older and he'd be old and *then* she would get him.

She heard a delicate tinkling of laughter and shifted around on the stone wall to see why Julia had taken so long to rejoin her. To Ammey's surprise, Julia was involved in an intimate looking conversation with Anthony. Ammey let out a slow breath, amazed how perfectly the two of them looked together. She turned back around and noticed Kidder sitting next to her. And next to him was Saren.

"Ammey wanted to marry me not so long ago," Saren reported.

Kidder spoke before she could object. "She falls in love easily," he said. "She loves another now, but he loves someone else."

Ammey felt hurt and panicked, especially as she spied Vincent locked in a passionate embrace with Theresa. Confused, Ammey stared into the dark, swirling water before her and saw something floating. It looked like a dark cross with a white face. It was a person, she suddenly realized, a child. It was Catherin! And she was floating, face up in the water, dead.

Ammey cried out and woke from the dream. It was a great relief to know it had been a dream. Her father sat in a chair near her bed, working on a battle plan. He was so deeply immersed in it; he did not notice that she'd awoken. Come to think of it, she did not recognize the room they were in. Lightbeams filtered through a large window with a gleaming, gold lattice. She wanted to ask where they were, but her throat hurt too badly. *Because she'd been choked*, she suddenly remembered. Who had done that?

Theresa appeared in front of the window, cocking her head to be certain of what she saw. "She's awake," she announced. She came closer, and as she did, her expression grew menacing. "You let a child die," she taunted softly. "They loathed me for awhile, but now they loathe you."

Lucas McKeaf got to his feet, and Ammey could see how disappointed he was in her. He began following his eldest

daughter from the room. Ammey wanted to call to him, she wanted to explain, but she had no voice.

* * * *

THE NURSE DIPPED the cloth and draped it back over the feverish young woman's forehead. Poor thing was twitching and muttering in her sleep again. She heard the floor creak behind her and turned to see who had come to relieve her. Her heart nearly stopped upon seeing Marko Corin standing at the foot of the bed. "S-sire," she stammered, bowing.

"Has she awoken?"

She shook her head. "No, sire. She dreams. Talks in her sleep."

"What does she say?"

"I ... cannot make sense of it, sire."

Marko Corin looked at the flushed face of the woman as he came closer.

The nurse backed from his path and watched as he gently touched one side of the young woman's face.

"She's burning," he said quietly. "Get her into cool water."

* * * *

AMMEY STRUGGLED to get up from bed. She had to explain herself and the events that had taken place to her family. She had to make them understand. Walking felt difficult, as if she was treading through water, and she did not know this room, this place. This was not her home.

She made it to the door, opened it, and found herself standing in a large, formal hall. She *had* been here before;

she knew this place. The crowd gathered in the room included her father, most of her elder brothers, Theresa and the entire Romero family. No one was looking at her. Did they even realize she was there?

"She will not be returning with you," Joseph Romero declared, his dark eyes flashing with hatred.

"We *know*," Hector Romero, Joseph's father, said with a distinct curl to his lip.

"You know what?" Anthony demanded, stepping a step forward. To be received in this manner was beyond rude; it was insulting. He blamed Theresa, of course, but he despised the entire Romero family.

"Of the unspeakable acts of abuse," Joseph finished for his father.

Ammey looked at Theresa, wondering why she was not speaking, why she stood looking so defiantly at her own family.

"What are you saying?" Lucas McKeaf demanded. "What abuse?"

"Your daughter was defiled by her brothers, General McKeaf," Hector Romero said in a low voice.

Ammey watched Theresa's chin come up. Not only was she not denying the charge, she was supporting it. She'd claimed it in the first place. She had to have. Ammey wanted to speak up, but the air had been knocked from her. The rest of her family looked as stunned as she. No one was speaking. Her brothers looked as if they'd been shot through the heart and her father looked like a stone statue, his mouth slightly ajar

as he stared at Theresa. Tom was the first to speak up. "It's a filthy lie! And if you repeat such slander—"

"You said this?" Lucas McKeaf demanded, his voice devoid of emotion. The betrayal was too profound; he could not yet absorb its impact.

"It's true," Theresa replied.

"She is a liar," Anthony railed. "And a loose woman."

"What a cowardly way—" Joseph began in a furious rant.

"She was caught with a man when she was fourteen," Tom spoke up sharply. "And punished."

Lucas held up his hand.

"But it never stopped her," David spoke up for the first time. He'd never felt such hatred for anyone as he did for his sister at that moment. To dishonor them, to dishonor their father, it was unspeakable.

"I said we were never to speak of it," Lucas McKeaf said, silencing them. He finally turned and looked at Hector Romero. "What she has claimed is untrue and a betrayal of her family. We came to get her, to protect her, but she is beyond our compassion and our duty."

"And what of her?" Hector Romero asked, turning a suspiciously gaze upon Ammey. "It's my understanding that she's suffered, as well."

All eyes turned to her. She shook her head. "No," was all she could utter. It sounded breathy and small, when what she wanted to do was to shout it.

"Of course, she would deny it," Theresa said quickly.

"She does not wish to be turned out," Joseph Romero said to his father.

"We would take you in, girl," Hector pledged, feeling compassion for the young, golden-hair beauty.

Hector Romero's sincerity was apparent. He meant well because he believed what Theresa had sworn. He believed her brothers were monsters. "It is a lie," Ammey said simply, staring directly into his eyes so that he would know her heart. "I swear it."

Hector looked from her to Theresa.

"She is loyal to them," Theresa stammered, speaking quickly. "I told you. She will never admit the truth."

"You have made your choice," Lucas McKeaf said to his eldest daughter, turning to go.

"Your daughter could be examined," Hector Romero said quickly, taking a step forward. "Your youngest. It would help to clear your name."

"My name?" Lucas repeated incredulously.

Ammey saw a flicker of fear on Theresa's face. It seemed her elder sister had not considered this possibility. What did an examination mean, anyway? Being interrogated by a seer or a holy man? For some reason, her father seemed enraged at the idea. "I would not have her put through such an ordeal," he exclaimed.

Theresa looked relieved, Hector smug, her father insulted. "I will do it," Ammey spoke up. Her voice was suddenly stronger.

"Ammey—" David said sharply, shaking his head.

Ammey looked at Hector. "Whom do I speak, to?" she asked, raising her chin proudly.

"We are leaving," her father announced.

Anthony strode forward to get his youngest sister.

Hector looked puzzled. "Speak to?"

Anthony put an arm around her shoulders and urged her away, but Ammey was locked in silent communication with Hector. If she had the power to help restore her family's honor, she would do it.

"It is an examination of your ... person," Hector explained awkwardly.

"Come. You don't understand," Anthony said with quiet urgency.

She pulled away from him. "I understand our honor is at stake."

"Amaris," Lucas McKeaf said sternly.

"I want to clear our name," she begged.

Hector had drawn close to her, his expression zealously searching. "Are you a virgin?" he asked her, just above a whisper.

It was the first time she truly, fully understood what they were talking about, what they had been talking about all along.

Hector watched the incredulous expression on the pretty fourteen-year old's face and knew she was still an innocent. This girl could not have been more different than her elder sister, not only in terms of appearance, but of all that dwelt beneath the surface. "Never mind," he said, just above a whisper. He looked at Anthony. "It's no longer necessary." He'd had dark suspicions about Theresa, but had chosen to believe her allegations for the sake of his son.

Anthony could see something had changed with the old man. He reached again for his youngest sister and led her away.

Ammey felt so strange, so bewildered by what had happened. What had come over Hector Romero, and why would Theresa have sworn to such a terrible lie about her own family, knowing it would destroy their honor?

She was first to climb into the carriage. She had spoken back to her father and to her brothers. She suddenly wondered how angry they were with her for it. Some of her anxiety was allayed when David, sitting next to her, took hold of her hand and told her everything would be fine.

She looked out the small side window at the comings and goings of strangers and tried to hold back the tears that were so close to surfacing. They were jostled as the carriage started forward. The carriage passed by familiar looking men on horseback headed in the opposite direction and she stared, trying to place Forzenay, Stripe, Kidder, Graybil and Vincent. Vincent gave a sad salute, as if to bid her goodbye. "No," she whispered. "Stop! Stop the carriage!"

* * * *

"A NIGHTMARE," the nurse said drawing her chair a bit closer. "You're having a nightmare. Quiet, now. Rest quiet."

Ammey opened her eyes and saw the same windows she'd seen earlier, large with a golden lattice. It was another dream. She couldn't wake. She kept passing from one dream to another. A strange woman was sitting nearby, her uniform

plain and stark, her hair pulled back into a cap. "I ... can't ... wake," Ammey said in a raspy voice.

The woman looked directly at her and blinked in surprise. She leapt to her feet. "Here, drink." She lifted Ammey and brought a cup to her mouth.

This was no dream. One did not feel so ill in dreams. The water dribbled down the side of her face and soaked into her gown. Where was she? She did not know this place. The woman helped her back down and rearranged her bedcovers. "Where am I?" Ammey asked. Her voice sounded low and rusty from disuse.

"You're safe. You're in the palace," the maid assured her. She hurried to the bell-pull and tugged on it.

Palace? What palace? Where had she last been? Ah, yes—they'd been going to Wydenyl. The horror of the attack on Cael and Zenon came rushing back at her and she struggled for breath.

"Shush, now," the nurse said, coming back to her side.
"Quiet yourself. You mustn't get upset."

But it was all coming back—Forzenay, Vincent and the others. Draven, Tariq—and then Daleog. They'd been taken prisoner, marched for days without mercy. "Catherin," she rasped. "What happened to Catherin?"

Marko Corin stepped into the room and was astonished to see the woman was not only awake; she was agitated. He continued in, trading places with the nurse. "Calm yourself," he commanded as he sat at her bedside. "You've stitches that could pull."

Ammey tried to obey. What the physician said made sense; she did need to calm. She was distraught from many things, not the least of which had been a string of dreams, nightmares and memories so real, they might have just occurred. The dreams had left her feeling unbalanced, unsure of her reality.

"Get some food and wine," Corin calmly ordered the nurse. The woman hurried from the room.

"I'm going to help you sit," he said. He wrapped his arms around her body and lifted her to a seated position. "Lean forward," he instructed.

She did, although it took his assistance. She was dismayed by her lack of strength.

He propped and arranged pillows, and then leaned her back against them, noticing her eyes. They were a beautiful shape and color, so very green. He lifted the cup of water to her lips and helped her to drink slowly. How very strange to be doing for another. The only person he had ever waited on was his brother, and that was years past. "That's better," he cooed, pleased that she'd calmed for him. After the stories he'd heard about her, he hadn't known what to expect. He lifted her hair and looked at the sewn gash on the side of her forehead. The bruising looked terrible. It would require more leeches immediately. "What do you remember?" he asked gently.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"Let me ask the questions first," he said.

His request was pleasant, his tone concerned. He was merely seeing to her health, she realized. "I ... we—"

"Take your time," he urged.

"The village," she began.

"Daleog?"

She nodded slightly, careful not to move her head any more than necessary. "They attacked."

He suddenly realized she didn't know who he was. She'd been so full of fire and hate, or so he'd been told; yet here she was, obeying his dictates and answering his questions. He felt no animosity from her. "Who attacked?" he asked, to be certain.

"Corin's wolves."

She said it with such a flash of raw hatred, he knew for certain she did not realize who he was—a bizarre situation, if he'd ever encountered one. "Why?" he asked, drawing her out for the sake of learning her feelings. He'd never before been in this situation, nor was he likely ever to be again.

"To strike terror. Because they're evil," she said, closing her eyes. She felt dizzy and fatiqued.

Evil. The accusation stunned him.

"Where am I?" she asked.

Her eyes were still closed. She was drifting back to sleep. "I promise you are safe," he said tenderly. "Can you stay awake until you have something to eat?"

She managed to reopen her eyes, but she wasn't certain she could keep them open. The physic was an exceedingly handsome man, she noticed. He had thick, dark hair, penetrating deep brown eyes and a caring manner. "I've had ... such dreams," she murmured.

"I'm certain you have."

She lost her battle to keep her eyes open, and he sat watching her sleep.

* * * *

IT WAS DARK outside when Ammey next awoke. The maid was dead asleep, snoring in a chair. There was one candle left burning on the table and it was down to the nub.

She had to relieve her bladder; it's what had woken her. She spied the chamber pot across the room and sat up slowly. She felt strange and detached from her body. There was a new wrap around her left ankle. She stood, testing her weight on it, then limped to the pot and made use of it. She felt so queer and weak.

Palace, kept running through her mind. She'd been told she was at the palace. What palace? Obviously, they'd been rescued, but by whom? There were only four palaces in the country, so far as she knew. Nawllah was the most logical answer, as it was the closest city to Daleog.

She limped over to the window to see what she could see, and was astonished to find herself at a great height. She reached out for the wall, shocked by it. Nawllah's palace was flat. Where was she? She felt a tightening in her stomach as an unlikely answer dawned on her. But she was being cared for, as if they'd been rescued, as if she were a guest. She could not be in Bellux-Abry. It made no sense.

Unless ... they knew who she was, and wanted to trade her back to her family at some terrible cost—perhaps her father's and brothers allegiance? Light snaked into the room and she turned to see the physic standing in the door. He'd

obviously come to check on her again. She saw him glance at the maid before walking toward her. "Are you well enough to be up?" he asked. His forehead was creased with worry for her.

"Where am I?" she asked.

She already knew, he could tell. She was terribly disturbed. He closed the distance between them. "Bellux-Abry," he replied, watching her closely.

She closed her eyes for a moment, as if the answer was the one she'd most dreaded hearing. "Wha—why am I here?" She opened her eyes. "Please, tell me. Please! Tell me the truth."

"You were captured," he said quietly, wondering what she was so frightened of when he'd made it clear she was safe. She'd been cared for—since being hurt, perhaps tortured, and nearly dragged to her death. "Why are you being cared for?" he asked, beginning to understand her quandary.

"Yes."

He drew a breath, wondering how to reply. "A party, which included the king, came upon you." How strange to talk about himself as if he was someone else. "He took mercy."

"Corin?" she practically spat. Her look was one of disgust. "He knows no mercy."

He couldn't reply. She was shaking with hatred—hatred for him.

"Please," she begged, her face suddenly frightened again.
"Help me. I must get away from here."

"You nearly died," he explained, suddenly desperate to know the reason for her vile opinion of him. "You must rest and recover your strength."

"It would be better to die than to be held by Corin."

He shook his head, baffled by her declaration and her hatred. "Why?"

He was sincere, she realized, most likely because Corin had been good to him. It was possible. Even monsters had pets. Perhaps the physic did not know of the atrocities committed outside the city walls. "Corin," she uttered softly, "—he's been good to you?"

He felt jolted, first by her emotion than by the utterance of his name. "Why do you hate him so?"

"He's evil," she breathed, desperate to have him on her side. Who else would help her escape? "His men murder, rape. They destroy villages for no reason. They destroyed the village of Wydenyl."

"That's a lie," he whispered, stunned by the terrible allegation.

She shook her head slowly. "I saw it. I was there. Two of my friends were killed there."

He shook his head again. It wasn't possible. Zephyr would not have gone so far, not under his banner.

"His wolf packs attack innocent people everywhere," she continued, talking quickly. If she could just keep talking, keep explaining, she could win him over and he would help her.

"My closest friend was raped and murdered by his men."

He backed up a step, into shadow, and his face was obscured.

"She was nobility," Ammey said, allowing her tears to flow. "They raped her and then they cut her heart out," she finished in a pained whisper.

The maid's snoring stopped abruptly. She sniffed, looked around and got up. "Oh, sire," she said, dropping at the waist.

The word hit like a hard slap. Ammey looked at the woman with wide, disbelieving eyes. The nurse had remained cowed and she was whimpering apologies. Ammey swayed. She looked back at Corin. He'd come close enough to her that moonlight once again illuminated his face. "You?" she moaned. His eyes were so compelling, so full of concern. It wasn't possible. It wasn't possible!

He reached out and caught her as she slumped into a dead faint.

* * * *

ZINO RECOGNIZED that this was the first of his moments. And had he not been preparing for it his entire life? "Yes, Wydenyl was destroyed," he replied slowly.

"Are you mad?" Marko Corin demanded, his voice shaking with fury. "What have you made me?"

"Feared and respected."

"Detested," Corin came back at him. "I'm thought evil!"

"The vanquished will always resent the victor. But do you not see? Your name commands respect. Your army commands fear. A parent must have the attention and the respect of the child before the child can be ruled."

"By destroying a sacred temple? An entire village?"

"We will rebuild anything you wish to rebuild once it is one country under your control, your kingship," Zino replied quickly. "Marko, Azulland needs a strong leader, and there should be one king of Azulland. How many kings does France have? England? This is your destiny!"

Marko turned and ran his hands through his hair, unable to think. It was always this way around Zino. The man had held too much control over his affairs for too long.

"In a fortnight," Zino continued, "we will march our forces into Shilbridge and set up camp. It will not be a siege. We've already sent emissaries to negotiate an annexation."

Marko turned and gave him a look.

"I swear it," Nafino Zephyr said earnestly. "I have withheld unpleasant details from you, but I have never lied to you."

Marko turned away again, but he was listening.

"At that point, we'll control the entire northern region," Zino continued. "Nawllah will capitulate easily. It's what they do best," he said wryly. "And when they do, we will control half the country. There is some strength in the southern region, but will they be willing to face civil war? Even if they were, they could not win."

Marko paced, then doubled back to sit in his throne. It was his to rule from. It had been his father's and his father's and his, all the way back to when his people crossed the sea from Corinth. He thought best from here. He remembered who he was from here. No woman, no matter how beautiful she was, would sway him from his destiny or control how or what he thought.

"A year from now, you will be king of Azulland," Nafino Zephyr pledged. "Three of the four royal families will be no more. We'll assign them some new title of nobility. And the temple of Wydenyl can be rebuilt, bigger and better than before. Whatever you wish. My only purpose in life is to serve the great house of Corin and to help fulfill your destiny," he said humbly.

The throne room grew silent, and the silence grew eerie and echoing. "I can feel you are burdened," Zino remarked after enduring all he could. "What can I do to help you?"

"Nothing. I need to think."

"Allow me send for Eskarne or one of your other women, perhaps. Some distraction, wine, and everything will look far clearer on the morrow."

"No," Corin replied. "Leave me. I wish to think in peace." Zino nodded, bowed, and backed away, relatively certain the first of his moments had been a complete success. "As you wish, sire."

* * * *

"MEN IGNORE the spirit realm until there is no other alternative but to turn to it," Milainah said. "And in the neglect, the gods forget about humans. It's not a difficult thing; we are far below them. But a dark force has been beckoned, and for the first time in many centuries, certain gods have reacquired a taste for humans, their pain and their passion."

"Surely, there are gods that can be called upon for help," Graybil said.

"We can pray and beseech but, understand, we are far removed from them," Milainah replied as calmly as ever.

"What are we supposed to do?" Vincent snapped. He was out of patience. Ammey was being held captive, or being sold at a slave market, or worse, and the seidhkona was talking gods and spirits.

Milainah looked at him, empathizing with his impatience and inner turmoil. "Bellux-Abry seeks to align with Shilbridge," she said. "And there are citizens of Shilbridge that welcome the alliance. If it happens, their foothold will be strong. By the events in Draven, you delayed the process, but you must not allow an alliance to form."

Forzenay nodded, grateful for the directive.

Milainah beckoned to Vincent. "Walk with me."

Somewhat grudgingly, he fell in step beside her, and they walked in silence, until they reached a vine-covered archway formed from the trained branches of pearwood trees. Sunlight filtered through, making delicate patterns all around. "Your agitation is understandable," Milainah finally spoke. "But it must be diffused. What you seek is not to be."

It was as thought he'd been hit squarely in the stomach.

"Are you saying ... I will not see her again?"

"You will see her again, though not for a time."

He breathed a little easier. It wasn't what he wanted to hear, but it was confirmation that he'd see Ammey again.

"Her path is not your path, though both are crucial," Milainah continued.

Vincent stopped. "Do we have a say in this? Does she?" Milainah considered him for several moments.

"Is she being hurt?" he demanded.

"She will know pain," Milainah replied. "Yes."

Vincent shook his head. "You tell me that and expect me to do nothing—"

"To do what you are called upon to do. More is at stake than you can know."

"Yes, war," he retorted. "And it all rides on our shoulders."

"War between men is not the worst that can happen," she warned, her eyes beginning to glisten silver. "At this point, it is the least."

Her voice echoed eerily and her warning chilled him. Someone touched him from behind and he jumped. He turned to see a young woman standing behind him. "Come," she said.

He turned back to Milainah, but she had turned and was walking away. He followed the young woman, feeling somewhat chastised. What had Milainah meant? She was saying war was inevitable? If that was true, was he wrong to care about Ammey? To care more about her than a war that would occur no matter what? "Where are we going?"

"To the pool of restoration."

"Ah, so a bath will fix what ails me?" Vincent asked sarcastically.

The young woman did not respond. She merely walked until they reached a pool of bubbling, white water. "The refreshment is for you," she said pointing toward a wooden goblet. "I will return for you."

He watched her leave and then walked to the goblet to see what it contained. It wasn't the usual golden-colored

beverage they served, it was clear. Water? He sipped and found it mildly sweet and thicker than water. He drank it and then disrobed. Admittedly, he did need a wash, but it wouldn't fix a thing except his scent.

The water was surprisingly hot, thus it took a few minutes to work his way in and fully submerge. He found a seat perfect for reclining on and perched on it, leaning back against a smooth rock wall. The water bubbled around him and foamed slightly under his chin. He closed his eyes and breathed out slowly as he pictured Ammey standing before him, poised for one of their lessons. Her hair was almost blindingly gold, her green eyes glistening, her lips soft and pink. She was soft and vulnerable, yet so vibrant, strong and alive. "Ammey," he breathed.

He grimaced, recalling that Milainah had said she would know pain. If only he could be there. If only he could spare her that pain. "Ammey." The name resonated from deep within himself. He would have given anything to spare her.

He heard a splash and opened his eyes. Two women were moving toward him from the middle of the pool, as if they'd come from within. Before he could adjust to this shock, a woman emerged from the water right in front of him. She held her hand out, beckoning him. "You must learn to let go of the past," she said in a whispery voice.

Reluctantly, he took hold of her hand and allowed her to pull him into the water. Her grip was strong and sure and suddenly other hands were on him as well, massaging and stroking.

"You must let go of the past to fully grasp the present, for it the present that determines the future," a voice said.

He was being turned around and around. He closed his eyes, feeling the intoxicating effect of the drink. There were so many voices coming at him, different voices, speaking one at a time from all around.

"You must forget her for now so that you may serve your cause."

"She is being watched. The seidhkona keeps her in sight."

"Your task is crucial. You are crucial to a great cause."

"Know that she cares for you as you care for her but, like you, she must ignore her heart and concentrate on the task ahead."

"You are strong, Vincent. You are needed."

"You must forget her for the present. You must forget her."

He became conscious of the stone bench beneath him and slowly opened his eyes to find himself alone in the pool, siting precisely where he had been. He waded to the side and climbed out, feeling weakened by the hot water, the drink and the hallucination.

"Are you ready?" his guide asked. She'd walked toward him with a soft wrap to dry with, keeping her eyes on his.

He accepted the wrap and covered himself with it. "I suppose I am." He glanced back at the bubbling pool. "I don't feel restored. Resolved, perhaps." He turned to get his clothes, but they were gone.

"They've been taken to be washed," his guide said.

"There's a robe in your lodge until they're returned."

He nodded. "Thank you."

She smiled gently. "We're happy for all we can offer, Vincent of the Five."

* * * *

"THE KING SAYS YOU are to join them for the banquet this evening," a handmaiden reported.

Ammey merely gawked as several maids came bearing accoutrements, slippers and accessories. They placed the items in large wardrobes. As if she was a guest, rather than his prisoner! "Why?" Ammey asked.

The maid glanced nervously at the others. "He said these were to be delivered to you," she explained with a slight shrug. "That you were to join them in the great hall when you are sent for, my lady."

Lady? Did they not understand she was a prisoner? "Will you need help dressing?" the maid asked.

"I will not," Ammey replied instantly.

The maid blanched. She was not supposed to have asked if the lady needed help, but when. What was she to do, now? She turned, wide-eyed, hoping for some assistance from one of the others, but they were all headed out, looking both baffled and fascinated by the beautiful young woman who was obviously being held against her will. She, too, followed, at a loss at what else to do or say.

"I will not, because I am not going," Ammey said when she was alone again. Edgy, restless and tired of being cooped up, she moved to the window to look out over the expansive view. The height she found herself at had frightened her at

first. It still gave her an odd feeling in her stomach. How remarkable it was to be at such a height, to be able to watch people going about their lives. They did not know she watched, or even existed. Was this how God felt, looking down on mankind?

She could see beyond the city into the green countryside. She could see neatly planted fields squared off into different crops. If only she could wish herself there. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass and thought of Dane. Could he sense that she was in danger? He'd often been able to when they were at home.

By now, her family would have received her and Forzenay's letters, and think she was well and safe in Daleog. Or had they received word and come for her? She sighed and commanded herself to stop dwelling on it. There was no possible way for her to know how or where her father and brothers were, or to know what they were thinking, feeling or doing.

She looked over at the items in the wardrobes, wondering about Corin's motivation in sending them. For days now, he had ignored her. How many days, she did not know, but it had been long enough that her ankle had healed. It was stiff now rather than painful. What did he want of her? Whatever it was, she would never give it to him.

* * * *

MARKO WAS BORED by the conversation and agitated that she had not yet shown up. When he finally saw the servant

he'd sent to fetch her, he waved the man over. "Where is she?" he asked, quietly, barely moving his lips.

"She said she was not well, sire."

Corin waved the man off, barely even mindful that Eskarne and her troop of dancers were moving in to tease and tantalize before their performance began. It was working well, on the guests from the consulate at Uerad, anyway. Corin got up and left the hall.

Zino watched him go before waving one of his attendants over. "See where he goes," he commanded.

* * * *

"UNLOCK IT," Corin said.

The guard did so as quickly as his shaking hands would allow.

Ammey was sitting cross-legged on the bed attempting needlework, although she bolted up at the sight of Marko Corin.

"I sent for you," Corin said imperiously.

His manner was vastly different from what it had been when she'd assumed he was the physician in charge of her care. Or had she only imagined the compassion in his eyes? "Are you under the impression I am one of your subjects?" Her voice sounded far calmer than she felt. Her heart was beating wildly.

"Not my subject, my prisoner," he clarified.

She lifted her chin slightly. "I am glad we agree on that." He cocked his head, trying to understand her. "Are you?"

She swallowed. "I am your prisoner, not your guest to be dressed up and shown off."

His eyes narrowed. "Prisoner, guest, it is no matter. You are mine to command, and you will do as you are told."

"Where are the others I was taken captive with?" she asked, expressly ignoring his declaration. "I have asked and received no answers."

She was deliberately provoking him, and he was sorely tempted to grab hold and shake her with all his might. No wonder someone had choked her. She was every bit as infuriating as he'd been told. "What is your name?" he asked in a quiet, dangerous voice.

She was suddenly lightheaded with relief. He didn't know her name! He didn't know who she was! "Jade," she uttered, after a brief hesitation.

He mistook her reaction for regret and fear at his obvious displeasure, which satisfied him for the moment. "Tomorrow you will dress and join me at banquet. Do you understand?" "Yes."

She had readily agreed and yet the defiance was back in her eyes; he could see it. He turned and left the room, disturbed by how greatly she was affecting his mind and mood.

* * * *

JOSHUA WALKED into the inn and smiled weakly. "Ulima?" Ulima turned, gasped and extended her arms. "I was so worried!"

"Where's Marcus and Liam?" Xavier asked, coming around the bar.

"They stayed," he explained quickly.

Ulima's smile froze and then disappeared. "Stayed?"

"At the Forge. There's much going on."

"They were invited to stay?" Xavier asked. He seemed impressed.

Joshua nodded stiffly.

Ulima and Xavier exchanged a look, then Xavier shrugged and broke into a cock-eyed smile. "You know Marcus. He must feel—"

"Yes. Wonderful," she finished for him.

Joshua felt relieved and emboldened. He'd expected them to be upset, to perhaps challenge his story. He'd decided on the way home he could not admit the truth; that he'd lagged so far behind that they'd been murdered while he'd escaped without a scratch, nor that he'd left their bodies and the letters, then ridden home as fast as his nag would go. What kind of a coward would he be branded? And for life!

The fact of the matter was, things were a state of upheaval and discord. It was coming to war. This was the best and easiest solution for saving face. Later, he'd pen a letter explaining Marcus's and Liam's death in battle and sign it from the McKeaf or, better yet, one of the McKeaf's sons—who would further explain how he'd come to be good friends with Marcus.

"Have something to drink, Joshua," Xavier said, going back around the bar. "Have you seen your father yet?"

"No, I came straight here."

"I'll get you something to eat," Ulima said before he could reply. "And then we want to hear everything."

Joshua nodded. He could do it. He'd practiced it a hundred times on the way back home.

* * * *

CORIN SAW JADE the moment she appeared in the door. She had chosen what had to be the simplest of the overgowns, one of a pale yellow, but she was lovely in it. She looked shy and somewhat out of place, and he had to fight the ridiculous urge to go to her side. She seemed very much the sheltered young maiden from a small, remote village, yet how many times had she struck him as being certain of herself, defiant, almost regal? He could not get a fix on her.

To Ammey's way of thinking, there were three advantages of dining in the great hall—to get out of her room, to see some of the palace, and to better learn her adversary. Yet, when she stepped into the dining hall, she was temporarily overwhelmed by the size and scope, the sheer grandeur of the place, not to mention the number of impressively clad guests in attendance.

An elegant looking man with dark hair and eyes came toward her and bowed slightly. "You must be Jade," he said. "Welcome." He reached for her hand and she allowed it. "I am Mehr Pechaco."

Ammey allowed Mehr to lead her to the table. Marko Corin was not difficult to spot. He was the lone face at the head of the table and he was watching her with dark, brooding eyes.

Once she saw him, she made a point of not looking his way again.

"Tell me about yourself," Mehr said, filling a jewelencrusted goblet with wine. "I understand you're from Daleog?"

That's what they thought, that her name was Jade and she was from Daleog. It made her feel giddy with relief. She looked at him, at the way he studied her, and suddenly felt gripped by the fear that he could read her thoughts. "Do you know what happened to the others I was brought here with?" she asked, hoping not only for an answer, but to distract him from reading too much.

He handed her the goblet. "I imagine they were brought to the market," he said softly, with regret.

"The market?"

"The slave market. It's a rather booming trade at the moment."

Was the regret in his face genuine or feigned, designed to create a bond between them?

"Was there someone in particular..." he began slowly.

She looked away, then looked back at him. "There was a child, a girl named Catherin."

Scores of servants moved in with platters of fish, game, meats, breads and vegetables. They moved around the table, offering each guest their choice of selection.

"Are you comfortable in your room?" Mehr asked, when the selections had been made.

"The room is lovely," she replied stiffly. She cut into one of the dishes; it was some kind of tender, thinly sliced meat in a flaky pastry crust. "Who are all these people?"

Mehr shrugged. "I rarely keep track."

"Do you reside in the palace?"

"I do. Marko Corin is my cousin."

She looked away, disheartened.

"I've disappointed you," he surmised.

She shook her head, but found herself at a loss of what to say.

"I hope we can be friends despite it," Mehr said.

* * * *

CORIN CLENCHED and unclenched his fists, puzzling over what they were talking about. She was purposely avoiding looking at him. She was baiting him, that's what she was doing. She was using his cousin to try and make him jealous. Him! Jealous! He had no appetite and finally waved for his plates to be taken away.

* * * *

"I WILL FIND OUT what I can about your people," Mehr pledged, after dinner.

She smiled, grateful.

"And yet you pay in advance," he said, smiling back at her.

Music began and women entered the room, dancing. Their costumes were nearly opaque, clearly revealing every part of their thinly clad bodies.

Mehr leaned toward her. "You are blushing," he teased softly.

She knew it was true. She reached for her heavy goblet and studied the jewels on it instead.

* * * *

"WHAT DID you say to her?" Marko demanded of his cousin when the guests were finally gone.

"Say?"

"What did you talk about?"

"This and that. She inquired after the other villagers," Mehr replied.

"Why does she interest you?" Voreskae asked Corin.

"It is nothing you would understand," Corin scoffed.

Mehr propped his feet up on the table. "I understand. She's soft and fresh and beautiful."

"I've seen more beautiful," Zino remarked. He'd observed Corin's preoccupation with the captive all evening.

"Really? Who?" Corin challenged.

"Eskarne, for one."

"Leader of the whores," Mehr said. He yawned.

"Yes, many of them are beautiful," Zino replied. "That's why they reside in the palace. And if you want this one to join them," he said, directing it to Corin, "say so and it will be done. If she interests you, have her and be done with it. They rarely hold as much allure after they're made to scream and sweat and grunt."

"You're a poet, Zino," Mehr said dryly. He rose. "I'm going to bed."

Marko watched his cousin go then he finished his wine and slammed the goblet down on the table with a bang. Zino had a point. The woman had crept under his skin. Once he indulged his desire, she would have less control over his thoughts. She would have less allure. He got to his feet and stalked from the room.

Zino grinned. "Enjoy," he called.

* * * *

"GIVE ME THE KEY," Corin ordered the guard. "And go. You're excused."

"Yes, sire."

Corin slipped the key in the lock and turned it. He stepped in silently and heard her steady, even breathing. She slept. The thought of her tormented him and kept him from sleeping, but she slept. He walked around the bed, staring at her in the moonlight. Her beauty was bewitching. Perhaps if her face were marred slightly, she would have less of a grip on him. He reached out and touched her hair. One golden curl fell into his grasp and he fingered it. She stirred, but did not wake. He removed his clothing and slipped in next to her.

She woke and fear immediately registered in her face. She'd been defiant without remorse and she'd fought off his wolves, besting six of them, but the thought of being bedded by him terrified her. She tried to move away from him, but he held her. "You ignored me tonight."

"Please," she begged.

"Please what?" She pulled away with all her might, forcing him to get on top of her and hold her down. "Please what?"

"D-don't do this."

Her genuine terror stymied him. Starting at age thirteen, he'd been offered the most beautiful young women of the region, all of them cultured beauties from the finest families. His women were all required to possess their virginity upon arrival and then they were bound exclusively to him. Not that deflowering virgins was all that pleasant; he much preferred the ease of experience. Jade's distress was because she thought him evil—and perhaps he was.

He released her hands and ripped her nightdress down the center, revealing the naked flesh he has so longed to see. Her fight increased, and her strength impressed him, although it was no match for his. The battle between them was arousing, he realized. He wanted to take her by force, to subdue her by force. She'd challenged him on every level and she would feel the consequences on every level. He forced her hands back over her head and raked her body over with his eyes, noting every fading bruise and scar.

"Marko," she cried.

He looked in her eyes. Her use of his name had shocked him speechless for a moment. She was crying, now, obviously miserable at his domination. "You of such power," she said. Her voice was low, her body shaking with her struggle to breathe. "You with your palace and servants and women. How many women?"

She was desperately afraid of him and yet trying to reason her way free of him. She was amazing and he would possess her in every way.

"I heard your father was a good man," she said.

He drew back in surprise at this tact and waited for her to continue.

"If he was, you must have inherited some g-good."

It was fascinating how her mind worked. "He was assassinated when I was twelve." It was no more out of his mouth, then he wondered why he'd uttered it. He shifted to her side, but kept her pinned by a leg. Raised up on his elbow, he studied her. "What does any of that have to do with you? My palace, women, my father?"

"You have so much. Please—"

"Why are you so frightened?" he interrupted. "Is it the pain?"

"No," she said quickly, shaking her head.

"Are you promised to another?"

Vincent's face flashed in her mind. She swallowed. "No," she said weakly.

He noticed the hesitation in her reply and felt a bubbling of hot agitation. "That's good, since I would have to see him cut in two."

"I mean nothing to you," she accused. "So why would you force me? You claimed you took mercy on me once. Show me mercy, now."

He reached over and ran his fingers down the side of her face and over her neck, positioning his hand in a weightless chokehold to watch her reaction. It was subtle, a slight gasp, a widening of her eyes. "Who choked you?" he asked. The bruises were gone now, but he remembered them well. Her eyes didn't waiver from his, but she did not reply. Why would she not tell him? "Tell me and I will see him dead."

"He is dead," she replied. She tried to cover herself, but he whipped the cover away from her grasp. She crossed her arms in front of her breasts.

"Put your hands down," he said. "Put—" he began sharply when she opened her mouth to argue.

She forced her arms to her side. Her face flamed and her muscles were so stiff, they ached.

"Did you kill him? This man who closed his hands around your throat?"

"No."

"Then, who?"

She looked away from him.

"This man you're ... not promised to?" he guessed. "Tell me!" He took hold along her jawline, squeezing as he forced her to look at him. "You will tell me everything I wish to know."

Her eyes suddenly blazed bright with defiance and hatred. "I will tell you nothing," she swore.

Even as shock and bewilderment filled him from the outburst, his jaw clenched in frustrated awareness that he'd lost his ability to force himself into her. He sat, grabbed her arms with a brutal force and jerked to him. "You will submit in every way—body, will, everything," he hissed into her face, barely able to control his fury. "You will call me your lord and master, your king."

"You are not my king," she retorted. "You are a vicious—" He shook her violently. "Do you want me to have you beaten?" he bellowed. "Do you?"

Her face was wet with tears, but she was no longer crying. She was also no longer speaking. Her defiance was complete, her hatred of him total. It chilled his flesh, even while it made his blood boil. He released her with a shove and got to his feet. "Tomorrow, you will swear that I am your lord and master," he threatened in a low voice. "That, I swear."

He turned away, dressed and left without looking back at her. He was sober and limp from the emasculation she'd put him through. She would pay for that. She would pay dearly and wish she had surrendered herself to him. He had never felt more fury or determination.

* * * *

CLOSE TO DAWN, she finally slept. She woke a few times during the day but did not have the will to get up. In the afternoon, the nurse nudged her awake. "He says you're to be brought," she said.

Ammey got up and was dressed. She would have chosen to wear the clothing she'd worn on the day the village was attacked, but they'd taken it away.

The nurse brushed the young woman's thick, fair hair and pulled it back into a simple ribbon, as she'd been instructed to do. She felt pity for her, for whatever lay in store. The men had gathered, the mood was dark, and Corin was more formidable than she'd ever seen.

* * * *

AMMEY WAS LED into a great hall with a gray and white marble floor. The ceiling was a hundred feet above, giving the

room a cavernous feeling. Several men stood or sat in a group facing her, most of whom looked smug and superior. Only two men showed emotion. Marko Corin, perched on this throne, looked vengeful, and Mehr Pechaco, standing to his far left, looked distressed. Other people were trickling in from various doors. Ammey was determined not to show the panic she felt. "I was sent for?"

A man of perhaps fifty, with the coldest eyes she'd ever seen smiled unpleasantly. "I was sent for," he mocked. "Like a queen. Were you the queen of Daleog, my lady?"

She did not reply. There seemed no reason to address such a question.

"She must have been," Zino continued. "Did she not nearly die protecting her people?"

Ammey's gaze was drawn to the men setting up a table of various bowls and instruments. She felt her breath thicken at the realization that they were going to torture her.

"I am Nafino Zephyr, senior counsel to the king," the man with cold eyes spoke again.

He was watching her for a reaction, and she was careful to give none.

"Come forward," he commanded, incensed by her lack of response. He pointed to a waiting armchair.

She hesitated, but there seemed no sense in antagonizing them. Obviously, they had the power to do whatever they had determined to do to her. She walked forward and sat.

Marko could see her trembling. It caused him to feel the first tug of regret and anxiety, but it was too late. He'd ordered her marked in front of all these men.

Mehr looked over at his cousin. He knew Marko was aware of it, but he was ignoring him. As always, he was too much in Zino's control, and now Jade would pay the price.

"Bring in her people," Zino spoke up.

Ammey grabbed a breath, stunned by the order. She heard the order repeated and then there was a shuffling of footsteps as a group of people were led in and forced to stand in her sightline. It took several seconds before she recognized they were the villagers of Daleog. They looked frightened, badly used, and exceedingly shocked to see her.

"Lady Jade," Zino said with a mocking formality, "who is your king?"

Understanding dawned on her. This was how Corin was forcing her to pledge her allegiance and whatever else he wished her to pledge. "Marko Corin," she said slowly, looking directly at him. She would say what he wished, but he would know how much she loathed him for it and how little she meant it. "King of Bellux-Abry."

"You will refer to him as the king of Azulland," Zino said.

She blinked, glimpsing their true purpose for the first time. It made her feel sick and she struggled to breathe.

"Shall you tell her or shall I?" Zino asked Corin.

Corin gave a small wave. The truth was, he doubted the strength of his voice, though no one else needed to know that.

"You will swear your allegiance to your king, or your people will die, one by one."

"I swear it," she said without hesitation or emotion.

Zino smiled slowly. "I see the defiance you speak you," he said. He was speaking to Corin, but his eyes never left hers. "You will say it and then you will prove it."

Mehr detested the manner in which she was being spoken to. "It has been decided that you will be marked, Jade," he said. "Your arm," he clarified. He was aware that Zino had turned his infamous glare on him but he didn't care. Jade was looking at him and he would show her compassion. "I am sorry to say it is a painful process."

Marko felt himself seethe. She'd thought of him as a monster, she'd defied him, and it had driven him to this cruelty. He'd been reckless in his anger, and what had he done but prove her point? So he looked cruel and Mehr compassionate, not just to her, but to everyone.

"And you will bear it in silence," Zino took back over, his face red from vexation at Mehr Pechaco's interference, "or your people will die."

"If you bear it in silence," Mehr spoke back up. "They'll go free." He looked over at his cousin. "A show of mercy and good faith from your king."

Ammey's gaze traveled to Corin, wondering how much pleasure he was deriving from this. Oddly enough, he looked anything but pleased.

A large man is a long, brown coat came at her with a terrible looking instrument. Two other men moved in to help restrain her.

"She should have something to bite on," Mehr said sharply.

"That would interfere with the demonstration of loyalty," Zino declared.

A man ripped the sleeve off her gown. She felt sick from fear. Her breathing was fast, her chest abruptly rising and falling with it. *Must not cry out*, she thought. *I must not cry out*. Her arm was roughly wiped with a cold solution and then she felt a stab of pain as a sharp bone instrument was forced into her arm, cutting through layers of skin. Unwittingly, she cried out. There was a hesitation, a moment when all breath was held, then Zino gave a curt nod and an executioner swung his sword and decapitated one of the prisoners, a middle-aged woman.

Several people cried out or screamed. Two women in the hall fainted. There was the sound of someone vomiting and another man hurriedly left the hall, his hand clamped tightly over his mouth. Ammey felt her breath leave in a painful rush.

Salvo Voreskae watched Jade go stark white. "She's going to faint," he remarked. No one paled that dramatically without fainting.

Corin bit his tongue, hating the corner he'd been forced into—by her, by Zino, by his own temper and bad judgment.

Ammey was close to fainting, so close that she did not even react to the next stab, or the next. When the pain sharpened with full consciousness, she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Pain can be blocked from the mind," David whispered in her ear.

She'd been so upset when he was hurt in a match in Qaddys. He'd been badly bloodied, and still he'd gone on. Afterward, he'd soothed her and dried her tears. "Pain can be blocked from the mind," he'd explained. She could hear him now, as if he were speaking into her ear. *Tell me again*, she silently begged.

"It hurts worse for you to see, than for me to take the hit," he'd said.

"How? How do you block the pain?" she'd demanded to know.

"You concentrate on the match, on your goal."

Goal. That the villagers go free. It's only pain. You can endure it. She was enduring it. Each stab was a white-hot bite of pain. It was a flash of color in her mind, as bright as a starflit. She would endure each one, assign it a color, and store it in a make-believe lantern. And it would be beautiful. Her flesh would forever be marked and ugly, but she would choose not to acknowledge it. Instead she would picture her lantern of endurance, and it would be beautiful. But the pain—

She gasped and her stomach muscles clenched. She attempted to lift her free hand.

"Yes?" Zino said, somehow amused by the gesture.

She was going to ask permission, but the pull of nausea was too strong and she wretched. She hadn't eaten all day, so there was little on her stomach to come up.

"That happens," Zino said.

Mehr was disgusted by Zino's callousness and he turned to Marko to register his displeasure. The pain and regret on he

saw etched on his cousin's face surprised him and worked to soften his animosity. What was done, was done, and what the king ordered, must be done.

With a soldier, the marking ceremony was so different. It was an honor, a glad event despite the pain, and it always turned into a raucous party. This was different. It was a marking for the sake of torture, for the sake of breaking a wild spirit. It was not joyous; it was sickening. Jade was shaking so violently, it took a man to hold her steady.

Eskarne watched the blood flow from the woman's arm, wishing she could derive some pleasure from it. If only she could concentrate on the woman's misery, rather than Corin's. She had never seen him look more miserable.

"You look fit to kill," Gitana whispered to her. "What vexes you so?"

Eskarne let out a breathy laugh without a trace of amusement. "How can you ask?" Everyone knew only the best and most loyal of Corin's warriors got to bear his mark on their right arms. His women were branded differently, with a small letter-symbol on the back of their hands. "He honors her," Eskarne hissed.

"Would you choose to be so honored?" Gitana asked dubiously. Even getting the small stigmata on her hand had been terrible.

"Look at him," Eskarne whispered.

Gitana looked at Corin and finally understood. Eskarne adored Marko Corin, and, for years, he had favored her. She still loathed Corin showing any attention to any other woman. Even his wish to hurt and punish the golden-hair had filled

Eskarne with hate and jealousy. And now, that he looked regretful and upset—

Zino's lips were pressed into a thin, hard line. The woman had not made a single sound since vomiting. How was that possible? "Rub in the ink," he ordered.

Ammey heard the command as if from a distance. *Pain can* be blocked from the mind.

"Your brother is right," Milainah said.

Ammey opened her eyes at the sound of the familiar voice and was astonished to see Milainah standing in front of Corin. It was Milainah; yet, somehow she could see through her to Corin.

"He has great courage, and so do you," Milainah said.

A gritty solution was being rubbed into her raw and bloodied flesh. She swallowed hard and tried to concentrate on Milainah. There was such a sense of serenity about the seidhkona. Would she ever be capable of such serenity? *Pain can be blocked. Pain-*

Marko blinked, confused by the expression on Jade's face as she looked into his eyes. It was searching and vulnerable. It was wounded, and it made him ache worse than he had ached in years, since the deaths of his father and brother.

The pain was too intense and there was nowhere for it to go. Ammey felt a lightening of being. She tried to raise her hand again, but she was already falling.

The men around her caught and held her limp body. They looked up at the king.

"Stop until she regains consciousness," Zino ordered.

"No, finish it," Corin overruled him. "Make it as small as possible and get it done."

Mehr studied his cousin, impressed that he'd just stood up to Zino. "And the villagers?" he spoke up.

"To the dungeon for now," Zino said, glaring at Mehr, as if he was somehow to blame.

"She endured the marking as required," Mehr reminded his cousin. "In silence."

"They go free," Corin stated.

Zino balked. Never, never had that been his intention. "Surely not, sire."

Corin glared at Nafino Zephyr until the older man turned back around, fuming, but silent.

Mehr, too, turned and stared straight ahead, careful even to guard his expression. The marking continued and the villagers were led out to the astonishment of all in attendance. Mehr had no desire to invite Marko's wrath on himself, the villagers Jade had suffered so much for, or Jade herself. It was a blessing for all that she was unconscious.

* * * *

THE VILLAGERS OF DALEOG did not believe they were being set free until they were left at the palace gates. "Let's get to the next village as quickly as possible," Athalia suggested, taking the lead. "I won't trust them until we're home again."

"Poor Margarite," someone moaned, grieving for the decapitated woman.

"She died quickly," Athalia replied, knowing they could not stop or even slow to mourn for their friend. "There was no pain."

"Why did they call her Jade?" Kira asked. She still felt confused and sickened by what Ammey McKeaf had been put through.

"Come, we must walk faster," Deborah urged, putting an arm around Kira. "Your daughter is waiting."

"And we don't want her sacrifice for naught," Athalia added.

Kira kept putting one foot in front of another. She kept pace, but she felt so queer and so alone in that queerness. "I thought she was dead," she muttered.

"We all did," someone said behind her.

"I couldn't believe my eyes," Nasim spoke up. "I still can't."

Kira looked over at the boy and reached for his hand, feeling a little less alone.

CHAPTER 6: Lady Jade

MEHR'S CHAIR was pushed to the back of Marko's private study and he was slumped in it as much as he possibly could. It was a good position of observation. He was practically invisible. After all, how threatening was a drunk to men of such prestige and power? Not that they hadn't been drinking, too.

"The men we sent to Shilbridge," Voreskae started in. "They did not arrive."

"Gilley?" Corin clarified.

"Yes," Zino spoke up. "And some others. It seems a division is missing."

Corin's eyes narrowed. "Missing?"

"Yes. We need to discover their whereabouts and we need to send a new emissary to Shilbridge. Someone trustworthy." Zino got up and poured more brandy into Corin's goblet and then his own. He held up the bottle for the other two men to accept or decline. Both declined. "I have suggestions for whom to send," he indicated a short stack of papers on Marko's enormous desk. "Look over them and sign the orders of whomever you choose."

Corin looked them over briefly, then handed them back to Zino. "You choose."

Zino barely held back a relieved smile. He walked away, thumbing through the stack. When he'd selected three, he walked back to Marko's desk and laid out the papers so

Corin's signature could be scribbled right down the line without much effort.

Marko had been drinking heavily this evening. He'd been drinking heavily for the last few weeks, since having Jade marked, as if he could not bear his own company. It was pathetic, and Zino had every intention of correcting the situation. He raised his brows at Voreskae discreetly before sitting back down.

"Is that all?" Corin asked.

"That's all," Zino replied. He lifted his glass. "To quick success in Shilbridge."

"And to finding our men," Voreskae added.

Mehr put his fist to his mouth and gave his cousin a look.

"Well, I'll be off," Zino said, standing. "Much to attend to."

"I'll go with you," Voreskae said. "Goodnight," he said with a sweep of his hand.

"You despise him, don't you," Marko said when the two older men had gone.

"Which one?" Mehr asked.

"Voreskae," Marko replied with a dubious look. "Of course."

"Why, 'of course'?"

Marko thought about it, shrugged and drained his glass.

"I have a question for you, cousin," Mehr said.

"What's that?"

"Why are you avoiding her? Or are you having her avoid me?"

Marko looked puzzled. "Who is she?"

Mehr grinned and cocked his head.

"I am not avoiding her," Marco gave in. "I see her frequently."

Mehr's grin faded. "You sat there, not a half hour ago, and said you had not seen her since the marking and had no such intention."

Marko leaned forward on his desk. "I am not a boy and I do not enjoy lectures or even advice."

"Who's lecturing?"

"Not you. Zino. He thinks she's a bad influence. That I should not give her the satisfaction or the pleasure of my company." He shrugged. "I didn't want to hear it again."

"So you have been seeing her?"

"Of course."

"When?"

"Late."

"And that's why she hasn't been joining us in the evenings? Because Zino does not approve?"

"Perhaps it's that you are too charming," Marko replied, drolly.

"I am," Mehr said with a straight face. "But—"

"I don't want to discuss it," Marko cut him off.

"Do you care for her?"

Marko reached for the brandy bottle, but misjudged the distance and knocked it over.

"A sure sign you've had enough," Mehr said, righting the bottle before the entire contents spilled. He went to retrieve a tablecloth from a corner table, knocking the few books and items off it without concern. He blotted the spilled brandy, noting it had ruined some papers.

"I could," Marko said, reaching for the bottle again.

"Could what?"

"Care for her." He poured. "If she weren't so difficult."

Mehr tossed the cloth down and sat again. "She's difficult?" He looked confused, then pensive. "Hmm. Let's see. We'll make two lists, her crimes and those committed against her. First, those done to her."

"Let's not."

"Attacked, taken prisoner, marched for days, beaten, dragged—"

"I said, let's not," Marko repeated, louder.

"Raped, I imagine," Mehr added. Marko's look went cold and Mehr realized he'd said too much. He held up his hands in concession.

"You go too far," Marko said, just above a whisper.

"Then I apologize." There was a long pause before he added, "I feel for her."

"And I don't?" Marko snapped. "I rescued her in the first place. Remember?"

"Why are you drinking so much these last days?"

Marko glared. "Why don't you come out with whatever it is you truly want to?"

Mehr considered, then took another drink. "Zino is dangerous, Marko."

Marko's look went from fierce to incredulous. "What?"

Mehr shrugged. "He manipulates you to do what he wants. Only afterwards, you feel like this," he waved his hand.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Marko snapped, turning away from his cousin.

"Oh, I believe you do," Mehr said. He got to his feet. He was tired, inebriated and he was probably saying too much. "You have a conscious, sire."

"Why does 'sire' always sound sardonic from your lips?" Marko challenged.

"Because it is, I suppose. At least when we're alone. And you are changing the subject." Mehr walked to the door. "Why don't you forgo the rest of the bottle and go to her? Perhaps Jade isn't the one who's being difficult. Perhaps she isn't the one who is a bad influence."

"Sleep well, cousin," Marko said, coldly.

Mehr gave in with a wave and left.

Marko slumped deeply in his chair. "But she is," he muttered to himself. She was lifeless in his arms. It was her way of punishing him for claiming her for his own. He'd tried to make up for what she'd endured but she wouldn't allow it. She didn't speak to him; she would barely reply to a direct question and she'd only do that if he insisted or threatened. That's why he went late, after his senses were dulled with drink. He couldn't abide her hatred of him.

* * * *

SHE'D ALWAYS DETESTED embroidery, but now she did it to occupy her mind and keep from going mad. Ammey looked up at the sound of the door being unlocked with an expression of loathing. It was earlier than he'd been coming. Her expression flickered to confusion at the sound of heavy steps, and then to fear at the sight of the two large men coming for her. They reeked of a sickening odor that reached

her before they did. They grabbed her arms and hauled her to her feet. "What are you doing?" she stammered. Her heart had leapt into her throat.

They forced her from the room and down the corridor without reply. Was this more punishment for her defiance? But he'd promised there would be no more and she'd believed him. She detested Marko Corin but she'd believed what he'd sworn to her. The men dragged her down a flight of wide, stone steps and down another long corridor. She had not been this way. It was not the way to the great halls. "Where are we going?"

They descended more steps, not one flight but two.

"Please," she begged, "tell me." It was dark in this part of the palace and the stone floor beneath her slippers felt very cold. If not for the torches mounted to the wall, she would have not been able to see at all. "Please," she begged again. "Did Corin send for me?"

An ominous looking door loomed at the end of the hall. The guard stationed before it saw them coming and opened it without so much as a flicker of expression. A blast of cold and a terrible odor assailed her. It was the smell of fear, suffering, human waste and death. She was being brought to the dungeon. She'd known fear, but a cold terror seeped through her unlike any she had known before. This was no fight, no even match. She was helpless.

The men dragged her through the dark dungeon. There were bars on both sides and there were cowering, frightened, deathly thin people behind them. The terrible smell made her nauseated, and the men each held one of her arms so she

couldn't even lift a hand to try to keep herself from vomiting. Her stomach heaved and she spewed its contents. One of the men released his hold, wanting to avoid the path of vomit, but Ammey, pulled by the other man, spewed again and it covered his front. He reacted without thought, backhanding her, knocking her against the iron bars.

"What are you, stupid?" the other man bellowed. "He said not to touch her!"

Ammey turned toward the cell, using the bars for support, and came face to face with a person. Man or woman, she could not tell. It had long, gray hair and mad looking eyes. The creature lifted one bony finger to its pale lips, a sign to be quiet. Ammey noticed its long, sharply pointed fingernails just before she felt a burning above her left eyebrow. Blood streamed down from the cut, into her eye. She'd been cut by the mad creature. "Pretend to be fainted," the creature whispered. She or he was already backing away. Ammey closed her eyes and went limp against the bars.

"She got it all over me," her assailant defended himself.

"And what does it matter?"

The first man whirled around to take hold of her again. "You knocked her senseless, you fool, that's what it matters."

The floor was slick and wet with human waste. Ammey was holding her breath, praying she would not wretch again.

"Carry her," the first man hissed, "—and you can explain to Zephyr."

She felt herself jerked up. Over a shoulder she went. The mad creature had not been so mad, she realized. There had been purpose in what she or he had done. It had been for her

benefit. They went a short distance, turned and walked down another corridor. They stopped and she heard a door creak open. Her heart was thudding so wildly. Would it give her away? They went forward again and she was jostled and then laid on a table, flat on her back.

"What is this?" Zino asked, enraged at the sight of the bloody, unconscious girl. "I said not to harm her."

"It was an accident," her assailant explained weakly. Suddenly, he didn't sound so strong or certain of himself.

"Yours?" Zino asked.

"I'm sorry," the big man simpered.

"Get me some salts," he yelled. The young woman jumped slightly and Zino saw it. "Never mind. She is coming around. Get a cloth for her face."

Ammey heard one of the men leave. She heard him shouting commands frantically outside the cell. How many men were out there? She could feel Zino move in close to her. "Jade?" he said softly. "Oh, Lady Jade?" She couldn't keep pretending to be unconscious. He knew she was not. Besides, he'd just said he didn't want her harmed. Slowly, she opened her eyes. He was leaning over her with a concerned expression. "Good, you're awake. I need you awake," he said gently. He straightened back up, allowing her to see shackles mounted to bloodstained walls and an array of torture instruments. The realization and subsequent fear in her green eyes were beautiful to observe. "My little playroom," he explained.

He turned and went to a small table stocked with a wide assortment of knives and instruments. From the corner of his

eye, he saw her start to rise. He turned and motioned her back down. "No, Jade. You remain in that position. I have use for that position."

Lying back down was one of the most difficult things she'd ever had to do. He was going to torture her. She could fight, but she could never fight and win against three large men. Still, she could not simply lie back and accept it. She might as well try and fight them—unless she could reason her way out of the situation. But how?

The guard was back, and breathless. He came to her and put a cloth over her cut.

"Press down on that," Zino ordered. "See if you can stop the bleeding. Otherwise, I'll have to sew it and I've nothing to numb your pain." He picked out an instrument and held it up, as if for her inspection. "Designed this myself," he boasted.

"My lord," the man who'd brought her the cloth, the man who'd hit her earlier, began to whimper.

"To the wall," Zino said.

"B-but, it was an accident. I swear—"

"To the wall or you die," Zino concluded.

The man looked around frantically, obviously considering bolting from the chamber despite the death sentence it meant. The other guard put a hand on his shoulder, but avoided looking into his eyes.

"No, please, my lord," the man begged as he was edged closer to the wall.

"It's only a lesson in obedience," Zino said. "But you are trying my patience."

Both men moved around Ammey, one of them whimpering in fear, the other resigned to doing what he had to do. Her assailant begged for mercy as his hands were enclosed in shackles. They had left the door unmanned. Either the placement of the cut or the blood loss was making her dizzy, and the terror of the situation only added to it, but she had to try.

Zino suddenly hovered over her and slapped her cheek lightly. "Don't even think about it. You and I are spending a long night together." He stuck something in front of her face and she jumped. "It's a vise for male parts," he explained as he held the instrument in front of her. "It grips," he said, opening its steel jaws, "and then tightens. You'll see." He stated it so pleasantly, as if he were explaining a game.

"Please, my lord, I have served you," the frantic man continued to beg.

"You do and you don't," he guessed. "Because your mind is elsewhere. I know. I understand."

"I hear him," Ammey replied in a rush of breath.

Her chest was heaving with fear. She really was a beautiful woman. Eskarne could not hold a candle to her. It was the uniqueness of her coloring. She was so soft and golden. "But could you repeat his words?" he cooed. "Have you listened that closely? What if it meant your freedom?" He paused, enjoying the emotion that pulsed through her lovely eyes. Before the night was over, he'd cut those eyes from their sockets and save them to remember her by. "That's what I thought," he said. He straightened and checked her cut. The

bleeding had slowed. "Keep pressure on it." He turned. "Guard the door," he barked to the free guard. "Unless you feel up to a chase."

The man obeyed and Zino turned and began securing the vise to the prisoner's exposed testicles. The man's whimper became a high-pitched whine. "By turning this," Zino explained as he did it, "the contraption tightens."

The man's whine became a frantic cry and the cry escalated.

"As much as you want it to," Zino spoke up to be heard over the man's wailing.

The cry became a scream. Ammey squeezed her eyes shut and felt hot tears squeeze out. She'd never heard a man scream before. It was terrible—terrifying. She rolled off the table and cowered against the far wall. Zino looked at her and smiled, knowing she wasn't going anywhere.

* * * *

MARKO GOT TO HIS FEET quickly, too quickly, having experienced an idea worth action, but then had to grab hold of the side of his desk until the room stopped spinning. When it did, he picked up the bottle again and left. He would insist that she drink. It was excellent brandy and it would loosen her rigidity. If she drank enough, she might even be affectionate. He could go to any other of his women and they would be affectionate. They would gladly do as he bid, anything he bid. But not her. Why did he care? Why did he so crave her affection?

He walked up the stairs slowly, holding on to the gold plated banister for support. It was her bravery. That's what he admired. She was courageous and strong, far more so than he.

He made it to the fifth floor, her floor, and walked the corridor leading to her room. He noticed the absence of the guard posted outside her room and assumed the man was emptying his bladder or bowels—until he saw her door standing open. He walked in and looked around, alarmed by the empty room and by the lingering smell in the air. He set down the bottle and left in search of the missing guard.

* * * *

"GET HIM OUT OF HERE," Zino said, stepping back.

The vise had been removed yet the man still screamed in agony from having his testicles crushed. He was crying. His face and his shirtfront were wet with his tears and both her vomit and his own.

Zino studied Jade. She no longer had the strength to stand, much less run. Not that she could have made out of the dungeon. There were only two exits, and he was the only one who knew about one of them. This was his territory, where much of his life's work came together. "He will not fail to adhere to my instructions from hence forth," Zino said lightly.

"Or walk upright, I imagine," Jade said.

Zino burst into laughter. The woman had spirit, he had to give her that. About to be tortured, yet she still had the

audacity to jest. He walked closer and perched against the table, staring down at her. "Tell me your name."

The question jolted her and she looked at him, full of alarm. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head at her reaction. He'd only been after her full name, but there was something here. He should have guessed, given the way she'd wormed herself into Marko's life. Zino smiled slowly, realizing that if he could uncover some dark secret about her identity, Marko would have less of a problem with the fact that he'd ridded them of her. Or, better yet, he could discover the secret, then force her to reveal it to Marko. Then Marko Corin could kill her, himself.

The first guard stepped back into the room.

"Get her up," Zino said. He ran his eyes up and down her body, wondering where and how to begin. "Against the wall, I think. Facing it."

* * * *

CORIN RUSHED DOWN to the guards posted at the front entrance. "The guard watching Jade's room—"

The guards tensed. Corin was livid.

"Where is he?" Corin yelled.

They shook their heads.

"Find him! Bring him to me! She is missing! He is missing!"

Three of the guards took off in a run and Corin ran his hands through his hair. Had the guard taken her somewhere to have his way with her? Would he be so foolish to forfeit his life like that? What else could have happened? He closed his

eyes and thought of the lingering odor in the room. Who smelled so badly?

* * * *

"WE'LL BEGIN with a simple lashing," Zino said, into her ear. She was facing the wall, her hands in shackles over her head. She was so tense, her knotted muscles began spasming.

She heard the whip before she felt it. It bit into her skin like fire and she screamed.

* * * *

"SHE IS n-not m-missing, s-sire," a man called out.

Corin turned and saw the guards coming back as quickly as they could make their feet move.

"You were on duty?" Corin asked the new face.

He nodded maniacally. "Y-y-yes. They c-came for her." "Who?"

"M-men, fuh-fuh-fuh-"

"I'm sorry, sire," one of the other guards spoke up. "He—" He waved his hand in front of his mouth.

Corin held up his hand and stepped closer. "What men?" he demanded.

"D-d-du-"

"The dungeon?" Corin guessed, suddenly recognizing the stench. He'd only been in the dungeon once as a young man when he was led through to hear the confession of the man who had assassinated his father. The guard was nodding fervently. "How?" Corin demanded. "On whose orders?"

"Y-y-yours, sire. They s-s-said. They had an w-w-warrant," he bit out with great concentration.

Corin elbowed past the men. He was perfectly sober, he realized. How had that occurred? He broke into a run. Someone would pay for this travesty. Someone would pay with their life.

* * * *

"WHAT'S THE TRUTH, JADE?" Zino hissed. "What is your real name?"

He'd inflicted only three lashes and she could think of nothing other than wanting the pain to stop. He could go on. He would go on, and she would tell him what he wanted to know. She would betray her family to make the pain stop. She heard the whip again and she acted, drawing back her head and hitting it to the wall as hard as she could.

Zino was so astonished, the whip's motion died in his hand. "Get her down!" he yelled.

The blow had stunned her but she was still alive. She wanted to deliver another blow, but she was too weak. Her body had gone limp.

She felt arms clamp around her. She felt one of her arms drop like a dead weight, as if it did not belong to her body. The other dropped and she was carried back to the table. Zino leaned over her and peered into her eyes. "You're not leaving that easily," he hissed. "Clean her up," he bellowed. "Staunch that blood flow."

Blood was pouring from the gash. She could feel it. She closed her eyes, praying for death.

"I will sew that gash closed," Zino continued. "And then you pay for taking matters into your own hands. You think you've known pain?"

"Zino!"

Zino jerked at the sound of Corin's voice. He leaned back over the girl, knowing he had to extract something and fast. But she was nearly senseless.

"Zino," Corin yelled again. Closer. There was no time. Zino looked at the young woman, hating her with raw passion. She may have just destroyed everything.

"Open it!" Corin demanded.

Zino had never heard such fury in his voice.

Ammey was vaguely aware of what was happening, although it was happening through a thick, red haze. Marko Corin was screaming for Zino. He was coming for her. He hadn't known—

"I can explain," Zino was saying.

Marko Corin paled at the sight of Jade. She was naked, her face covered in blood.

"She did that to herself," Zino declared.

Marko looked around the torture chamber. He was dangerously lightheaded and reached out to brace himself against a wall.

"Sire?" A half dozen guards had followed him into the dungeon.

"Cover her," he said harshly. "Get her back to her room. Get the nurse."

"She is a spy," Zino called. "I can prove it."

Two guards saw to it. They covered her with her own clothing and carried her out. Marko turned and leaned against the wall, breathing through his mouth.

"Sire?" one of the remaining guards spoke. Marko Corin did not look well. He'd gone quite sickly looking.

Marko lifted his hand, and was reminded of the way Jade had lifted hers to warn of being sick to her stomach. The memory was painful. "Nafino Zephyr is to be confined to his rooms," Marko commanded, slowly.

"Marko," Zino pleaded.

"Kill him if he resists."

A young guard looked at Nafino Zephyr fearfully, wishing he had not followed after the others. These were the most powerful, ruthless men in the country, and he was positioned between them? Thankfully, Zephyr stalked out, not even looking at him.

Marko looked at the unkempt man who'd been assisting Zino. His look made the man tremor. "Get my men," he hissed.

"Yes, sire," the man said. He turned and ran, leaving Marko alone in the chamber.

Corin looked around, horrified by the instruments, the smell, the blood stained walls and floors. Jade's blood was all over the table and floor. He'd been in the chamber once before, the day he executed the traitor Nede Vhord, the man who had assassinated his father, but he'd been only thirteen and there had been so many others in the room.

Zino was a traitor. This made him a traitor. Marko took one step and then another. He stopped, blew out a breath

and continued. He had to appear strong, no matter how he felt. He left the chamber and walked out of the dungeon, not meeting any eyes or any of his men until he'd made it out. "Clear the dungeon," Corin said when they came running.

"Clear it, sire?" one of the guards asked. "Do you mean ... kill them?"

Marko Corin looked at the man, wondering how many of his own men thought him heartless. What had he done to deserve such a reputation? "Free them," he clarified. "The place sickens me."

"Yes, sire."

* * * *

"GET THE PHYSIC," Corin ordered the guards outside her room as he walked by them. He continued in and saw Jade slumped against a handmaiden as the nurse dealt with cleaning the bloody cuts on her back. Her protection had been his responsibility and he had failed.

Keeping her eyes shut did not stop the tears. Ammey breathed out in little pants, as salve was applied to the cuts. The pain in her head was a tremendous roaring.

"Drink this," the maid said softly.

The woman was trying to help, but Ammey could not move. She could do as bidden.

"Here," Corin said. "Give her to me."

Ammey felt a shifting as Corin took her in his arms. How strange that she felt safe in his embrace. His scent was familiar to her and his fury at her treatment was a comfort.

He tipped her back, supporting her head in his palm. "Drink," he said. "It will dull the pain."

She felt a glass against her lips and tried to make herself drink. She managed to swallow some, despite its bitter taste. She felt a cloth wipe the excess away. "Is that enough?" she heard Corin ask. "I want her to sleep. Until these wounds are healed."

"It will make her sleep," a strange voice said. "It will keep her from pain, sire."

"I want her cleaned up. I will not have her lying in this stench."

The medicine was working to pull her away. She felt herself lifting, flying. She smiled softly, suddenly realizing she could fly home. She wanted to be home.

Corin laid her down.

"I should attend that he head wound," the physic said.

Corin nodded and got up. He felt himself being observed by the silent women. "Don't leave her," Corin said. "Someone should be with her at all times."

They nodded and murmured assent and he left.

* * * *

MARKO WENT BACK to his chambers and paced. *Never handle a delicate situation when you'e under the influence of strong emotion*. His father had taught him that. And had he listened? Had he heeded the advice? No. He had hurt the woman he most wanted to care for in the heat of anger.

He was far too upset to face Zino tonight. But tomorrow he would. Zephyr had been his father's counsel and his own

most trusted and loyal ally for the whole of his life. Why would he have done this? Marko shook his head. It didn't matter what had taken over Zino's mind, he'd had no right. He'd taken property of the king, valued, beloved property. Beloved—

He sat. Admittedly, he had an infatuation with Jade, but was it love? She detested him. Perhaps that's what Zino had seen and tried to correct. He'd been wrong, but was it a crime befitting of death or banishment? He was too addlebrained to come up with answers tonight. Tomorrow, he would come up with questions and answers.

* * * *

MEHR WATCHED the performance, aware that's precisely what it was. It was a performance worthy of a stage and audience. Nafino had just opened the scene by walking into Marko's study, where he'd been summoned, and presenting Marko with his own personal dagger. "If you believe I am not your most loyal subject, take my life."

Marko took the dagger in hand and ran his fingers along the sides of the blade. It looked as though he were considering the request.

"Your father gave me that," Nafino said, dropping his gaze.
"There would be no more appropriate instrument to use."

Marko's eyes shot up at the older man at the mention of his father, and Mehr shook his head, disgusted with how easily Zino played his cousin.

"Why?" Marko spat. "Tell me why."

"Why ... was I going to torture her before killing her?" Zino asked, as if confused.

Marko's eyes narrowed at the admission. The man had just condemned himself. "What possessed you to take such a liberty with what belongs to me?"

"I was attempting to extract information from her."

Marko slammed the dagger on his desk. "What possessed you to take such liberty with what belongs to me!"

"It did not seem such a liberty, sire."

Marko was incredulous. He looked at Mehr and then back to Zino. "To kill my woman does not seem a liberty?"

Zino looked confused. "To kill her?" He paused. "But you ordered the execution, my lord."

Marko stared uncomprehendingly.

"Last evening," Zino said in his concerned, paternal voice.

Mehr's eyes danced between men, wondering what game was being played.

"I did no such thing," Marko declared.

"You did," Zino argued. He turned to Mehr. "Perhaps Mehr remembers?"

"I was here?" Mehr asked. "When he gave the order?"

"I believe so. As was Salvo."

Mehr looked thoughtful, but what he truly felt was hopeful that Zino had finally signed his own death warrant. One could only get away with so many lies. "I heard no such thing. When was this?"

"Perhaps it was before you arrived," Zino said on second thought. "If we could call Salvo in, I'm sure it could verified."

"So now you don't recall if I was present or not?" Mehr asked, careful to keep his voice neutral. He was fully aware that he'd been offered a test of loyalty and had failed it in Zino's eyes.

"We were drinking rather heavily," Zino said.

"A factor we are all well accustomed to," Mehr replied coolly.

"I said no such thing," Marko repeated as he stood.

"Why would I lie?" Zino appealed. "You even signed the warrant of execution." He pulled it from his belt and handed it over.

"Which you brought," Mehr noted aloud. "Did you suspect he would not remember signing it?"

Zino looked at him angrily. "I am a careful man."

"That you are," Mehr agreed.

Marko stared at his signature and felt ill. When and how had he signed it? What had he ever said that would have indicated such a desire?

"Marko," Mehr said.

Corin looked up at him.

"You did not sign her death warrant," Mehr stated.

"He did," Zino argued.

Marko held it out for his inspection.

"I do not need to see it," Mehr said. "If it is your signature then you were tricked into it." He drew a sharp breath, realizing when Zino had done it. "The men sent to Shilbridge," he blurted.

Zino stiffened.

Marko suddenly understood. "Have they been sent?"

"Yes, my lord," Zino replied, turning to him. "I believe they have."

"Who?"

Zino swallowed, "Noah Dulay. I also sent a division for support."

"I signed three sets of orders," Marko said. He saw Zino's face twitch. "Whose were they?"

"Dulay, Charleton, leader of the ninth division, and Wendermere, leader of the second," he replied calmly. "I had not yet made up my mind which division to send."

"Which did you send?"

"The ninth. I sent the ninth."

"And you informed them of this last evening?"

"Salvo did. Yes. They were to have left this morning.

Naturally, I could not verify that, having been confined to my rooms."

"So," Mehr spoke up. "You should still have the order for Wendermere." He could see a vein pumping in the man's reddening neck.

"What is it you are suggesting?" Zino asked Corin.

"That you tricked me into signing the death warrant," Marko replied in an even voice.

Zino turned to Mehr. "And you believe that, as well?"
"Oh. ves. I do." Mehr replied firmly. "But why? What i

"Oh, yes, I do," Mehr replied firmly. "But why? What is Jade to you?"

"Jade," Zino said bitterly. "That's not even her name."

"Oh? What is her name?" Mehr asked, his tone full of doubt.

"I wasn't able to learn it."

"What made you believe it is not her name?" Marko demanded.

"Her fear when I asked," Zino replied.

"The fear is easy enough to understand, given the situation," Mehr spoke up. "What made you ask the question in the first place?"

Zino turned to Mehr. "Are we enemies, Mehr Pechaco? Why do you talk to me so?"

"I have my cousin's best interest at heart," Mehr replied.

"As do I! I have never done anything but protect and care for him. Since he was a boy, I have watched over him. I have—"

"Why kill Jade?" Mehr interrupted sharply.

"She is undermining his concentration, his will," Zino explained forcefully. "He is a king. She is a whore!"

Marko slammed his hand on the table and Zino started, before turning back to face him. "Leave before I have you hung in your own torture chamber!"

"Marko-," Zino begged.

Corin held out a shaking finger. "And do not come in my sight again unless I send for you."

Zino turned abruptly and left the room.

"Send him away," Mehr beseeched his cousin. "Send him away or kill him."

Marko turned an accusing glare on him. "Why? Why do you hate him so?"

"Why do you not? Can you not see how ambitious he is?" "He is ambitious for me, for my reign."

"He is ambitious for himself," Mehr retorted. He shook his head. It made no difference. Nothing they had learned made a difference. "You are blind to it, Marko. That man, his control over you, it will be your downfall." He turned and walked to the door. He opened it, then turned back to Marko. "I will not enjoy being right this time."

* * * *

AMMEY WOKE from a wonderful dream. She'd been at home and everyone had been there.

"What a lovely smile," Marko said from across the room.

It took some effort, but she focused on him. It was not easy as the daylight was unmercifully bright. She felt strange and heavy. Corin was coming toward her, studying her face.

"You've been sleeping for a time," he explained. "How do you feel?"

She blinked, uncertain of what to say. Events were coming back, making her feel panicked and pressured.

"Jade?"

She looked away, wondering what to say. Zino had called her a spy. He'd known she was not who she claimed to be. Had he convinced Corin of that? Corin had sworn to protect her, but he had not. And the truth was, she was not strong enough to accept torture without eventually breaking.

Corin sat and reached for her hand. He lovingly stroked it. "Do you remember what happened?"

She kept her eyes from his. If only she could think clearly. "What do you remember?" he pushed.

The solution to her dilemma suddenly dawned on her. If she did not remember anything—anything at all, there would be no need to torture her for information. "N-nothing," she whispered.

His expression was intense, his heart beating hard against his chest. "You must remember something?" he said softly. "Jade, look at me." Slowly, she turned toward him. She seemed frightened. "Think," he urged. He kissed her hand to get a reaction. She looked confused but not hostile. "Do you know who I am?"

She hesitated and then shook her head.

Marko looked up sharply as a nurse entered the room. "Get the physic," he barked.

She jumped and then hurried out.

Marko looked back at Jade and found her eyes on his, searching, confused. She was a blank slate. She was his blank slate. "Do you remember your name?"

"You said ... Jade."

It was amazing. She only knew what he told her. "And I'm Marko. Does that sound familiar?"

She closed her eyes, unable to continue looking at him.

"You were hurt," he explained. "That's the reason you're so tired. Your head was hurt."

She felt him kiss her hand again and again.

"It's alright," he whispered. "It's alright. You needent worry about anything. I'll tell you everything you need to know."

* * * *

"HEAD INUJURIES can be that way," the physician confirmed. "Of course, it could be the opium."

"Stop giving it to her," Corin ordered.

"I have been tapering off the dosage."

"If she has no memory now, is it likely to return?"

"It is possible," the physician hedged.

"I'm quite certain it's possible," Marko barked irritably. "Is it likely?"

"I cannot say, sire," the man replied apologetically.

Marko waved him off. He would know soon enough if her memory loss was from the injuries or the opium. He walked to the window of his chambers and peered out. The setting sun was casting glorious, magical looking colors over the city. He sighed deeply, realizing her memory loss was an opportunity to begin again, to create the very situation he'd longed for. Then, even if she did regain old memory, she'd have new, fresh memories, as well. She would know he was a good man. She would care for him, perhaps even love him. How strange that the crime Zino had committed against him had actually turned out to be a gift, perhaps the greatest he had ever been handed. "Beautiful."

* * * *

STRIPE SQUATTED by the side of the lake and stared out at a series of ripples in the otherwise calm water.

"Are you alright?" Kidder asked, having followed him.

"I needed some air."

"I know," Kidder commiserated. "We've become politicians and jailors."

Stripe stood back up and faced Kidder. "We can't win this. We cannot sway everyone and we cannot remove every obstacle."

Kidder shrugged. "And yet it's our mission."

"Perhaps we go at it the wrong way."

Kidder thought about it. "I don't see how."

"This is a political city with an elected council," Stripe began. "They've decided to align with Bellux-Abry out of logic and reason and perhaps a measure of greed."

Kidder nodded. "Because they believe Corin's army will ultimately be victorious."

"And because they do not want to be the first battlefield. If they resist, they can be assured that will happen."

"Greed because of the assurance they will be exempt from taxes?"

"Yes. So here we work to change the minds of individuals of the council, remove those whose thinking we cannot alter—

"And we barely hold off annexation," Forzenay said, walking up from behind. "One day at a time. One meeting at a time. Sometimes, one hour at a time."

Stripe and Kidder turned to him. "We need different means of persuasion," Stripe stated.

"And yet, here we are," Forzenay said. "We have worked diligently to get in place, to align with like minds, to be in a position of first hand knowledge."

"Politics," Kidder muttered.

"Yes," Forzenay replied. "Not our first choice of assignments. But think. We have successfully held off an

annexation that would have occurred and we've done it without blood shed."

"Not counting Brungard's bloody nose," Kidder jested.

"I, too, feel the frustration," Forzenay said to Stripe.

"We're close to failure, and with good reason," Stripe declared. "From the council's perspective, there is every reason to align with Bellux-Abry. Why are we in this alone?"

"Because no one else realizes what is at stake. And I cannot allow any of us the freedom to go inform our allies. Our work is too pressing and too important."

"And too precarious," Stripe added accusingly.

"Yes. And too precarious."

"I have to go," Kidder said, noticing the position of the sun. "—relieve Vincent on watch," he clarified.

"Stay alert," Forzenay replied.

Kidder nodded, looked at Stripe and then left.

"Take a swim," Forzenay urged Stripe. "Until exhaustion sets in."

"That's Vincent's solution," Stripe replied wryly.

"Try it. Things will look better—"

"On the morrow?" Stripe asked incredulously.

"No, when you're fast asleep, exhausted from your swim," Forzenay returned.

Stripe shook his head, but relaxed a bit.

"You are right," Forzenay mused as he looked out over the water. "We will not be able to hold off the annexation indefinitely."

Stripe whipped off his tunic. "I'll race you to the other side."

"But then your loss might further frustrate you." Stripe guffawed.

"Alright," Forzenay agreed, removing his own tunic. "I suppose I could use a night's sleep, as well."

* * * *

AMMEY WAS HELPED out to the informal garden, which was in full bloom. The weather was balmy and breezy. How strange that it was midsummer. She was missing weeks of her life. Except for headaches and a tenderness of the flesh on her back, she was healed from her torture session. Corin had mostly avoided her during the last weeks and she had no knowledge of what had become of Zino. She longed to know but could not ask, given the memory loss she had to feign.

"Here we are," the handmaiden said, stopping at a shaded bench.

Ammey sat. She was breathless from the short walk.

"Do you need anything?"

"We'll have wine," Corin said.

The maid gasped at his voice. She turned to him and curtsied, before hurrying off.

He came closer. He couldn't help noticing how shy and reticent Jade seemed with him. "How are you feeling?"

"Weak," she admitted.

"You've been lying in bed for weeks. You'll get your strength back. We'll take walks every day, now that you're up."

She nodded politely and stared at her hands in her lap. "Jade?"

She looked up at him.

"Have you regained any of your memory?"

"No." She looked away, fearful her expression would betray the truth. "Nothing before waking from the accident." The physic had told her she'd been injured in a horseback riding accident.

Marko sat beside her. "That must feel very disconcerting." "Yes."

He reached over and took hold of her hand, pulling it toward him and placing on his own leg. He kept his own larger hand wrapped around it. "Well, you know your name and mine," he began.

"And that you are king," she added.

He suspected she'd been told as much. "And that you are my wife," he added calmly.

She turned to him, shocked by the announcement. "Your ... your wife?"

He smiled. "Yes."

She looked away and swallowed hard. She had not expected this turn of events.

"Don't be frightened. Perhaps your memory will come back to you. But if it does not, I'll tell you everything about your life. And we are young. So much of our lives have yet to happen." He put an arm around her and felt her trembling. He leaned in and kissed her temple. "You don't have to be frightened," he pledged. "I will never let anything hurt you again."

* * * *

ON THE FOURTH FLOOR, the servants were busy moving all of Jade's personal effects into a chamber that adjoined Corin's, and, on the second floor, Salvo Voreskae gathered Corin's harem, as he'd been instructed to do. "The king has married," he announced.

There was a collective gasp, then a din of exclamations. Eskarne looked stunned and murderous. "Married?" she challenged. "Impossible! When? To whom?"

"To Jade." He had to wait for the clamor to die down before he continued. "You are free to go and will be paid a stipend for your time here, or—" The commotion was too great to be heard over. "Or," he yelled.

"Quiet," Eskarne screamed. She stood and glared around the room.

"Or," Voreskae continued. "Some of you may continue on as dancers, maids—"

"Maids?" Gitana wailed, holding out her hand to display her stigmata. "We are the king's women!"

"The king's whores," Voreskae corrected. "And he no longer requires your services."

"Did he say that?" Eskarne demanded.

"I am telling you this at his command," Voreskae confirmed.

"How much is the stipend?" someone called out.

"How many dancers can stay?" Gitana asked. "And who will choose? I want to stay!"

"Stop talking all at once and I will explain," Salvo called out. How any man was attracted to noisy, emotional females, he would never understand. When it quieted, he continued.

"We'll keep a dozen or so of you as dancers and to perform other services as required."

"What other services?" a woman asked.

He raised a brow at her. "Services you formerly performed only with the king." It was amusing how shocked they were. "The stipend, if you prefer, is generous and based on the amount of time you've been in residence. You will see me one at a time for specifics."

"I do not believe this," Eskarne hissed.

"Believe it," Salvo returned coldly. "It has happened."

* * * *

MARKO LED JADE back into the palace. "Are you up to walking the stairs, or shall I carry you?"

"I'll walk."

He smiled. "Stubborn, as usual."

She blinked in surprise. "Am I?" she asked lightly.

"We'll take it slow," he said, pacing himself to her comfort level.

When they got to the fourth floor, he took hold of her elbow. "This way. You're going back to our rooms. The physic thinks you're well enough now."

She held up a hand, needing a moment to catch her breath and to adjust to this newest development. He'd just spent an hour weaving an intricately detailed account of her life. He'd assigned her a mother, father and elder sister—all of whom died in a sweeping winter sickness that had taken most of her village. He'd spoken so tenderly, frequently stroking her hand or kissing it. His affection was mind-boggling and she'd been

looking forward to being alone and getting things back into perspective.

"You've overdone it," Marko said. He picked her up and began carrying her.

"No," she objected. "I only needed a moment."

He shushed her and carried her into the largest, most beautiful bedchamber she'd ever seen. The décor was ivory and a restful shade of blue.

He set her on the enormous bed and took a step back, watching for a reaction. "If we resume our lives as they were," he began, "—your memory may return. But if it does not, we still exist, we still go on, we still have one another."

Trapped. She was trapped in a charade she had introduced.

"I'm going to send in your maids, and they'll help you undress. You must rest."

She nodded, relieved he was going.

"We'll have our supper served here," he said with a soft smile. "We'll take it slow and leisurely for a few days."

We. What had she done? He leaned down and kissed her cheek, then left. What had she done?

* * * *

MARKO PULLED HIS WIFE close, feeling utterly content. Her head was on his shoulder, her arm across his chest. He had made love to her, and he felt more whole than ever before. She hadn't been the wild, passionate partner she would be, given time, but she hadn't been cold and lifeless in his arms either. Mostly, she seemed slightly confused and

searching when she looked at him, but that was to be expected.

"You told me about my life," she murmured.

He looked down at her, realizing this was what he'd been missing in his life—a love, a partner, a wife. He kissed the top of her head. "Do you want to hear more?"

She shook her head. "I want to know about your life."

"Ah." He drew a breath and let it out slowly. "I don't remember my mother," he began slowly.

"I don't ... remember mine much, either." Shock reverberated through her system. She had just begun to share a real fact of her life with him. What had possessed her to do that? Only when she realized Jade could say the same, had she finished the sentence. His chuckle felt like a reward, but the fact remained that she had just begun to open up to him.

"My father," Marko continued. "He was a good man. A good leader. He was assassinated when I was twelve."

She pulled back, shifted, and turned on her stomach to watch him. "I'm sorry," she said sincerely. She had asked about his history to get an idea of how he came to be as he was. She hadn't expected revelations of pain and loss.

"My father had one day each fortnight set aside when he dealt with citizen concerns. The assassin, Nede Vhord, attacked my father with a dagger."

"Was he mad?"

"He seemed it. Yes. He claimed taxes had ruined him. Or, I was told that's what he claimed."

She waited as he struggled for the right words.

"I don't know how he smuggled the dagger in. No one was supposed to have weapons on their person when they were admitted. After that, the policy changed, of course. We no longer have an open court for citizens' complains and issues.

"The idea was good," she said. "The outcome tragic."
"The idea?"

"A day when you're accessible to the citizenry," she explained. "How are their issues handled now?"

He frowned. "Various ways."

She resisted saying more on the subject. He was not accustomed to being challenged or doubted. "Who took care of you after your father died?"

"I killed him, you know," Marko said.

There was a long pause before she could find her voice. "Who?"

"Nede Vhord. He was caught, made to confess, and I killed him."

"You mean to say you ordered his execution," she said slowly.

He shook his head. "No. I was handed the dagger he'd used on my father."

Her breath caught. "You were twelve?"

"Thirteen. It was my thirteenth birthday. You see, Vhord had escaped after he killed my father. It took a few weeks to find him."

"Thirteen," she muttered, picturing Nicolas at that age.

"Vhord confessed, Zino handed me the dagger and announced it was to be the day I became a man."

Ammey shook her head, horrified by the story. Unwittingly, tears sprang to her eyes.

Marko closed his eyes. "Forcing a dagger into a man, hearing his scream. It was terrible. They were all watching me. I just wanted it to be over."

She laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arm around him, despite the conflict that tore at her. Whatever he'd become, no boy should have ever been put in that position. Zino was an evil, demented man. She felt Marko stroke her hair. There was still tenderness in him. There was still good. He longed to be loved.

"I'll tell you something no one else knows," he said quietly. "I walked out to the garden afterwards. Vhord's blood was still on me. It was wet on my hands. I walked until I knew no one else could see me and then I ran. I was searching for the perfect hiding place. I didn't want to be seen. I finally tripped and fell in front of a ugaria bush and vomited. The ground was damp. I tried to wipe the blood off my hands but I got muddy. I was ... crying and the mud caked on my face. I made such a mess; I had to wait until dark to return to the palace."

"Oh, Marko," she said in a low, tremulous voice.

"To this day, I can't bear the sweet stench of the ugaria bush," he admitted. He felt moisture on his chest. "Are you crying?" She shook her head slightly, but he knew she was. "It was a long time ago," he said reassuringly. He turned her over and smiled softly at the tears on her face. Already, she loved him. "I shouldn't have told you."

She shook her head again. "I'm glad you told me," she said in a thick voice.

He reached for an edge of the soft linen bed cover and gently wiped her face. "If my brother hadn't been ill at the time, the responsibility would have fallen on him, I suppose."

"Brother?"

"I had an elder brother. William. He died shortly after my father."

"How?" she asked gently.

"He became ill. I stayed with him night and day, but he just grew more and more ill."

"That must have been terrible after losing your father."
"Yes, it was."

"What was he like?"

He smiled sadly, wondering when he'd last spoken of William. He couldn't recall. "He was the milder of us. I was the one who constantly got into mischief. I ... don't usually speak of him."

She nodded, understanding.

"He would have made a better king than I," he admitted.

"Why do you say that?"

"He was calm, slow to anger, intelligent. He was fluent in four languages," he said with a note of pride in his voice.

"You didn't care for languages?" she guessed.

"I had no patience for my tutors." His look grew strained as he recalled Zino's support in quitting his studies after his father died. He should have been encouraged if not forced to continue, but Zino had stuck a dagger in his hand, declared him a man and then offered an introduction to women and

wine. His self-declared mentor had encouraged physical activity and taught him to believe he was the next king of Azulland, if not all of Europe. "Enough sad talk," Marko said, wanting to change the topic of discussion. His past was too painful to dwell on. "Let's talk about you, about what you want. Name it, and it's yours."

"I don't know."

"Well, think about it."

"I want to ride again, when I'm well enough."

"We will ride," he assured her.

"I don't want you to worry so that I'll be hurt again. You needn't hover. I know you have important matters to attend to."

"None more important than you."

"But you were right. We should get back to our lives, to the way things were."

He suddenly grew more serious. "Things can never be as they were. Not for me. I nearly lost you," he said slowly. "And I want a life with you—children with you." She blinked and started to pull back, but he held her. "You are my wife and there is nothing in the world more important to me than you. Nothing. Do you understand?"

She swallowed. "Yes," she whispered.

"I love you," he said tenderly, shifting to lay his head on her chest. "And I nearly lost you. It's changed everything."

She stroked his hair and stared out. Not only was she trapped in a charade of her own making; it was changing her. It was changing him. It was changing everything.

* * * *

MEHR TURNED at the sound of his name and frowned thoughtfully as Marko came toward him. "Don't tell me," he teased. "I know your face. It is familiar." He tapped his forehead in feigned concentration.

"Amusing," Marko said. "Walk with me."

Mehr did gladly. "How is your wife?"

Marko looked over at him. "You must learn to say that without a smirk."

"I'm working on it."

"Have we heard back from the envoy to Shilbridge?"

"With Zino back in charge, how would I know?"

"He's not in charge. Do you resent it so that I didn't have him killed?"

Mehr stopped. "If he's free to come and go and he pleases, he is in charge, Marko. No matter what authority you think you've stripped him of."

Marko studied his cousin. "What would you have me do?" "You already know the answer to that," Mehr replied.

Marko started forward again and Mehr followed. They walked outside and toward the first of the formal gardens.

"I wish for a change," Marko said. "I've decided to retire Zino. Give him an estate. He made a terrible mistake, but he has spent thirty years in our service."

"Make the estate in Oisenbant and I'd say it is a wise and just decision."

Marko laughed.

"And Voreskae?" Mehr asked.

"Same. Retirement."

"Good."

"I would like your advice on who to put in command of the army."

Mehr made a face. "My advice? What do I know?" Marko stopped. "More than you let on, I think."

"I do not know the army, Marko. Zino and Voreskae have been in charge of it for as long as I can remember. They have instituted a complex system and at the top of that system are those renown divisions—"

"Wolf packs," Marko interjected. "I notice everyone avoids using the phase around me unless they're drunk."

"The problem is, those men are loyal to you *through* Nafino Zephyr. He's the face they know best. It's his authority they know."

Marko sobered. "It is the perfect recipe for a coup," he said quietly.

Mehr nodded. "I would say the climate exists—"

"Stop being so political. It's not like you."

"Not like me? What about you? What's gotten into you? I've been the one saying Zino is dangerous. You've been the one defending him, no matter what his actions."

"Can you not be content that I'm agreeing with you now?"

Mehr sighed. There was no point belaboring a matter that could not be altered. "I will investigate the workings of the army," he said. "But I'll need to know your thoughts and plans. Will you continue with the aggression?"

"The aggression?"

"What would you call it? Gobbling up neighboring towns and villages, annexing cities to increase the size of your

army, reaping destruction for the sake of fear and the hope of paralyzing—"

"Fine, yes, I understand. Stop." He looked off.

"Do you want the whole of Azulland, Marko?"

"Well, why shouldn't I?" he asked quietly.

"Why would you?" Mehr challenged. "You have an army of nearly ten thousand men. More, with the addition of Uerad and Ghlaxmire troops. Do you ever see them? You have a city, a beautiful city, parts of which you've never seen. You have everything and yet you live a small, protected existence within the palace."

"What does any of this have to do with anything?" Marko asked testily.

"You should discover your own desires, your own destiny, rather than operate on those Zino's assigned you."

Marko walked on, mulling over the words. "Perhaps I am not ambitious."

"Certainly not the worst that could be said of a man," Mehr replied, following a step behind.

Marko turned back to face him. "What if I want nothing more than to have a wife and family and live in peace?"

"Peace is a noble effort, Marko. Peace would be a blessing to the masses."

Marko felt buoyed by the support. "I wish to recall the wolf packs. And the envoy to Shilbridge."

Mehr's eyes glistened. "Excellent."

The decision did feel good. It felt right. "I should speak with Zino."

"Let me," Mehr offered.

"You don't think I'll be able to do it," Marko accused lightly.

"I think ... I know of some wonderful properties in Oisenbant."

Marko grinned but shook his head.

"It would be easier for me," Mehr said. "He was not like a second father to me."

"He was no father to me," Marko stated in a flat voice. "No matter how many times he claimed to be."

* * * *

"WHAT ARE WE TO DO?" Salvo asked for the tenth time. The month they had been granted to get their affairs in order and leave the palace was nearly up.

"Stop frothing at the mouth," Zino snapped.

"But we are out of time!"

Zino was staring out the window as another of the twelveman divisions rode toward the palace. All his planning and work, for nothing. The summer colors had dimmed, just as his potential had. Autumn was upon them. They should have had an agreement in place with Shilbridge by now. They should have been moving their forces southwest and pressuring Nawallah.

"He could have had it all," Salvo said sadly.

Zino couldn't bear to have the sentiment spoken aloud. It made it manifest. "We will have it all," he said with an edge to his words.

"How?" Voreskae begged to know.

Zino turned to him. "We find another Vhord, of course."

Salvo blinked. "For Corin?"

Zino gave him a scathing look. "For Jade. Who do you think instigated all this? Do you think it's coincidence that our boy discovers his backbone the same time he takes a wife? We remove her, and he comes back to us. Crushed, dejected. The only family he has left."

"There is Mehr," Salvo said, bitterly.

"Mehr will die, too. But Jade first. She's the key."

"Wouldn't it be perfect if we could kill Jade and frame Mehr?"

Zino thought about it and smiled. "Too complicated, I think, for as quickly as we need to move. Perhaps we can frame him for bedding her. That would be as damning and far easier."

Salvo smiled at the thought of getting even with the arrogant Mehr Pechaco.

"We need an assassin, a patsy, and an opportunity," Zino mused. He suddenly laughed. "Oh! It is too perfect."

"What?"

"The king has just reinstated the open court to hear from citizens," Zino reminded him. "What if someone gets past the guards and murders Jade?"

"Oh," Salvo said, the beauty of it dawning on him. "As before."

"As before."

"If only he'd listened to you," Salvo said with mock grief.

"It can't be too similar to before," Zino mused, beginning to pace with renewed vigor. "In fact, an abduction for ransom

would be better. After all, why would a common citizen kill the Lady Jade? But for money—"

Salvo watched with admiration. No one plotted, schemed and then saw a plan brought to fruition like Nafino Zephyr. It was almost a shame the world would never know what he'd pulled off.

"Perhaps there is a way to lay this at Pechaco's doorstep and kill two birds with one stone," Zino said slowly, a plan beginning to come together in his mind.

"That would be perfect," Salvo said, his eyes alight at the thought of it.

"Yes, perfect," Zino whispered.

CHAPTER 7: The Desert of Uerad

AMMEY DRIED OFF from her bath and stood naked before the looking glass wondering, with her newly acquired scars and the many changes below the surface, would her family still know her? Did she know herself, or was the pretense of a false identity finally beginning to take a toll? How was it possible to feel so removed from one's own person?

Over the past weeks, she'd come to care deeply about Marko Corin. Did that make her a traitor to her people? Her eyes dropped over her body. Her belly was flat now, but what if it were big with child—his child? She looked back into her green eyes accusingly. "Who are you?" she whispered. Frowning, she walked away from the looking glass.

She was no traitor. She was still Ammey McKeaf, even if she went by a different name for the time being. She had done what she was told, what was necessary and, eventually, she had gotten swept up in an unexpected consequence. Besides, if Marko continued his path of restoring peace, and if she could explain to her father and brothers that he was not the evil man they had thought him to be, they would learn to accept him.

Truly evil men had manipulated him, so, at worst, he was guilty of poor judgment. Of being weak. Of a bad temper. Not that she'd seen that temper since her rebirth as his wife. He had been nothing but loving and attentive since then and she had come to trust him. In fact, she had decided to reveal her true identity as soon as Nafino Zephyr and Salvo Voreskae

were out of the palace and out of their lives. Her family needed to learn of her circumstance, and she would never be able to get word to them without Marko knowing.

She slipped on a chemise and went to select her gowns. Marko had requested her presence during today's session of citizen's issues to better gain an understanding of the people and their problems. "It is also to put your face before them," he'd said. "They should know, besides a king, they have a queen to honor, respect and obey."

A queen. No wonder she felt removed from herself. She was no queen. She was pretending to be someone who pretended to be queen. But she was helping Marko to find himself, to be the ruler he was capable of being—which meant she was helping many. Surely, this is what the seidhkona had meant by her affecting many lives—which meant it was her destiny.

She was poised in front of a wardrobe, going through the array of colorful gowns when a memory of Julia hit with crushing force. Ammey squeezed her eyes shut and clearly recalled the last day they'd spent together. She'd been trying to help Julia select a gown for her *inquisition*. She smiled even as she fought back tears. She breathed out slowly and had to wait for the ache to pass.

Feeling shaken, she selected a pale blue square-neck undergown and a deep blue, almost violet overgown and dressed, then went back to the looking glass to put up her hair, as was befitting a married woman. "Queen Jade Corin," she said softly. She did rather look the part. What would Julia have said?

She heard her maids enter. They were late to dress her but, of course, unlike most *ladies*, she'd spent a lifetime dressing herself. She turned toward them but saw, with a painful jolt, two strange men were coming at her with grim intent etched on their sharp features. Before she could react, even to make a sound, they were on her, one brutally wrenching her arms behind her back while the other shoved a cloth into her mouth. She choked and tried not to gag as her hands were tied and she was forced from the room. Outside the door were the prone bodies of her obviously dead maids. Fresh tears blurred Ammey's vision and terror filled her. These men were nothing like the blundering guards from the dungeon, they were deft assassins.

They navigated the palace perfectly and nearly silently. When they arrived at their desired exit point, they covered her head in a dark, wool hood before forcing her outside. Her panic was dull and throbbing. This was Zino's work. He'd struck again, only more effectively, after weeks of careful, meticulous planning. Soon, she would be dead and Marko would be devastated, because he had not been able to protect her. She was lifted up onto a horse and a man mounted behind her. "Swing your leg over, Lady," he commanded, even as the other man took hold of her ankle and moved it for her. "We've a long ride."

* * * *

"WE ARE FROM LEKLAF, a village east of Uerad, sire," the old man began in a tremulous voice. He was not accustomed to crowds or splendor and today he faced them both.

Corin nodded.

"Our village was burnt in the siege of Uerad," he explained. "We lost our foodstores. We have worked to rebuild and replenish, but with winter coming, we are worried for our survival."

"Your foodstores will be replaced," Corin said. "See to it," he directed to his secretary.

The young man wrote down the order.

"Thank you, sire," the man said, bowing deeply, astonished and a little distrustful that the king had agreed so readily.

"Next," the secretary called.

A frantic looking guard appeared at the side door closest to the head of the room, hoping to gain Corin's attention. The secretary saw and motioned to Corin. Marko was instantly alarmed by his look, especially given that his wife had not joined him, as she had promised to do. He went to the guard at once. "What is it?"

"You should come," the guard pleaded.

Corin saw a half dozen guards poised to spring into action, a grim look on their faces. "Where is my wife?"

"It appears she has been taken, sire."

Marko bolted forward, surrounded by his guards. *Not again*, he prayed. *Let it be a mistake.*

The guard posted at one end of the fourth floor was dead, his neck broken, and it was the same with the maids in front of their suite. "Search the palace," Corin yelled. "And find Nafino Zephyr!"

All but two of the men hurried to do his bidding and Corin went into her chamber, his heart hammering. *Not again*, he prayed with each painful beat. He eyes fell to a rolled parchment on a chest and he strode to it, picking it up with a shaking hand. A key fell from it but he unrolled and read the paper without bothering to retrieve it.

Your lady will be gladly exchanged for one thousand gold roms. Deliver them to the chest positioned at the third flag of the Uerad border. Lock the chest afterwards. Do this and your lady will be returned unharmed.

"Ransom," Marko breathed, suddenly as relieved as he was terrified. "Get Mehr," he said, finding his voice. "Get my treasurer. Get everyone!"

* * * *

THE HEAT BECAME INTENSE as the hours wore on. When they stopped and the man behind her dismounted, she'd lost all track of time and space. She felt numb with a fatalistic fear. They were going to kill her. That was their full intention. She was pulled down and her hood was removed. Even though the sun had begun setting, the light blinded her temporarily.

"Why take it off?" a man complained behind her. "Just cut off her head."

The words caused a painful shiver up her spine.

"Shut up," the man closer to her replied. "They don't need it for three days. You know what this heat can do to a body in three days? You want to live with that stench?"

"Remember the warning," the first man hissed.

"This is you and me," the other rejoined. "Has anyone ever gotten away from us? What are you worried about?"

"You leave her tied!"

"I'm going to. And do not tell me what to do."

Ammey had her vision back, although there was little to see. Wherever they were, it was a barren, isolated desert. Uerad, she realized with a jolt—the desert of Uerad. It was said no one traveled through the desert of Uerad. Any who attempted it died a gruesome death.

These men were professional assassins with every intention of killing her and cutting off her head. With her hands bound behind her, there was no chance of escape. Even if she could make it to one of the horses, she could not control the animal and force it to run fast enough for her to escape. Her only chance was through negotiation. Whatever Zino had offered, Corin would offer more. The men were both in their twenties, although their dark hair had begun thinning. They had a similar look, small foreheads and rather long noses. "You're brothers, aren't you?" she asked.

One of them walked toward her, his face devoid of expression. He reared back and hit her, sending her reeling sideways onto the dry dust. He came at her again and she tensed for another blow. Instead, he squatted and helped her to a sitting position. "We need your head, but we don't need it to look good. You understand my words, Lady?" She was afraid to answer and that pleased him. He got up and went to take a piss.

The men ignored her as they set up camp. She struggled to get loose of her bonds, but they had tied her securely.

"You want some water?" one of them asked.

Her mouth and throat were so dry, they ached. She nodded.

He sauntered toward her with his canteen in hand, stopping before her. He took a long drink, allowing some to dribble down his chin. "Ahhh," he breathed with great satisfaction. He brought the canteen toward her, even allowing its neck and one precious drop of water to touch her lips before pulling back. "No, not like that." He took another drink, filling his mouth, then came at her, pressing his mouth to hers, emptying the water into her mouth.

Both men laughed.

"That way it's good for both of us," he said. He took another drink and transferred it. "Look at me, I'm mouth to mouth with a queen." He reached around the back of her head and bent to kiss her. She resisted, so he slapped her face. He then hauled her to her feet, crushed her body against his and tried kissing her again. She couldn't wedge a knee between his legs, so she bit his lower lip. He abruptly pulled back, bleeding and furious.

"I told you," his brother spoke up in a smug tone.

The injured man turned and glared at his brother and she took advantage of his distraction by turning sideways and driving a hard kick to his midriff. The force of the kick doubled him over and sent the other man running at her.

Time for the move Forzenay had taught her. *Concentrate*, he coaxed in her head. *Control your fear. Do not allow it to control you*. She waited until he was almost to her before delivering a hop kick to his face. He was slammed backwards

and blood poured from his broken nose, but he was only stunned. They were both only stunned. She needed her hands free. If her hands were free, she could successfully fight them. She turned and ran, despite the fact there was nowhere to run to, but her bound hands deterred her speed, and one of the men caught her easily and threw her to the ground.

"Only because my hands are tied," she panted. "It's the only reason you can—"

He pulled a dagger from its sheath and came at her. She rolled away on instinct and was driven into the ground, his knees on her back and buttocks. He cut the rope from her wrists.

"Wha are you doig?" the man with the broken nose yelled.

She was jerked back over. "You would have had a few days," the man said in her face as he slipped his dagger back in its sheath. "But now you die, and not because your hands are tied, you arrogant bitch." He wrapped his hands around her neck and squeezed.

She reached for his dagger, but couldn't get a grip on it. She clawed at his face, gouging an eye, and he screamed in pain and released his hold. Gasping for air, she brought her elbow up under his chin sharply and followed it up with another to the center of his chest. She scooted clear of him and tried to get her feet underneath her, but the bloody nosed man tackled her back to the ground and began pummeling her.

"Get her up!" the other yelled. "I want her to feel my blade while she still has sense enough to know she's being cut apart."

She was pulled back to her feet, but the earth was spinning too greatly to remain upright and she crumpled to her knees. She was bleeding from her nose, mouth and ear. The man that delivered the pounding did a spin kick to her head and sent her crashing to the ground.

"What did I say?" the other screamed.

"Thaz a gick," bloody-nose screamed at her.

"Get her up."

She knew it was over. She was hoisted up and held in place as her executioner drew his sword with relish. She closed her eyes, overwhelmed by regret that she would never see her family again or Vincent or Marko. *Please*, she prayed, *help me. I don't want to die*.

"Open your eyes," the man taunted. He jabbed her chest with the tip of his blade, causing a stinging pain and a warm stream of blood to seep.

She opened her eyes but the world still spun. Behind the man, there was a pale full moon in the sky. Milainah had claimed she was favored by Selene, goddess of the moon. Ammey's lips moved as she silently prayed to her, begging for help.

The man's bloody nose gurgled in her ear. "Do it," he urged.

She braced for the cut. The blade was poised only inches from her heart.

"Whaz wrog wi you?" bloody-nose demanded. "Do it!"

Ammey tried to focus on the man with the blade but her vision was blurred. He didn't answer, nor did he move. He had a frightened, incredulous look about him and she suddenly had hopes of Marko and his army standing behind her. Or Forzenay's Five.

"Wha-"

Her vision was either playing tricks on her or his skin suddenly looked as gray as the sand around them. Only his eyes were moving. It looked as though he were trapped in his own body. Ammey felt a resurgence of strength. She tugged sideways and got free of her captor's grasp. He, too, was frozen, although his eyes moved and his nose continued to bleed and drip on the dry sand in front of him. His skin was not only gray; it was cracked and parched looking.

Ammey backed away. The brothers were getting grayer and grainier looking by the moment. The desert was cursed. She'd always heard it was cursed. A strong wind suddenly gusted, kicking up sand, and the men began to disintegrate before her very eyes. Cluthing her bruised side, Ammey turned and limped toward the horses as fast as her weakened legs would carry her.

By the time she took both canteens and mounted, there were only stumps left where the men had stood—stumps and one shiny dagger reflecting the light of the sunset. She swallowed, dismounted with a soft grunt, and went back for the dagger. She couldn't tear her eyes from what was left of the men. Praying to Selene had done that? What else could it have been? The impossible had just occurred. A miracle had just occurred, a gift, an answer to a prayer. She could never

have survived the assassins on her own. "Thank you," she beckoned in a heartfelt whisper. "Thank you."

She remounted, determined which way was west, and directed the horse left of it. South—toward home. Bellux-Abry was far closer, and she did want Marko to know what had happened to her, but she felt the possibility of sweet freedom, which she had not pondered in weeks now. Freedom. The mere thought of it was intoxicating. Besides, she was not safe in Bellux-Abry, no matter how much Marko desired her well-being.

The Blue Mountains loomed in front of her. She tried to picture a map of the country, but she couldn't get her mind working that clearly. What she was picturing was the relief on her father's face when he saw her again. One by one, she pictured all her brothers and their various reactions. Nicolas would run to her and embrace her, barely holding back his tears. Tom would merely heave a sigh of relief and then angrily demand to know where she had been while they had been worrying themselves sick over her. Anthony would take hold of her arms, his dark eyes gleaming, not knowing whether to shake or embrace her. David's powerful embrace would nearly crush her. Richard would hold back, observing the expected reactions of all the others until it was his turn. Then he would kiss each of her cheeks, smile into her face and tell her how gladdened they all were to have her back. Dane would be last. His embrace would be equal to her own and according to what she needed. He had that innate sense where she was concerned.

Home. Her own room, the soft, green lawns and the dining hall with all of them sitting around—she missed it all. She wanted to be there with her kith and kin so much more than she had allowed herself to think about during the last months. Once she was safely back at home, she would find a way to get word to Marko. He should know that she was safe.

* * * *

"IT SAYS SHE WON"T BE HARMED," Mehr reminded Marko.

Corin was beside himself filled with a pervous vigor that

Corin was beside himself, filled with a nervous vigor that would not allow him to sit or relax.

"It says," Zino repeated ominously.

Mehr glared at him.

"The palace should have never been opened to the public," Zino stated for the third time.

"Did the public execute four guards and two maids?" Mehr challenged. "Did the public know the palace well enough—"

Marko held up his hand, tired of the argument between the men. "Enough!"

"If I may offer some practical advice," Zino said in a low voice.

To Mehr's dismay, Marko allowed it.

"Station men at a close enough distance to the border that we may see the culprit when he returns for the money, but far enough away as not to be detected."

Marko considered the suggestion and nodded.

"I will see it done, if you will allow it," Zino offered.

"Yes. Go."

Mehr wanted to moan aloud. The abduction had Zino's scent all over it. Why could Marko not see it?

"Follow him," Marko said grimly to his cousin when Zino had gone. "Make certain."

* * * *

THERE WAS NOTHING but flat, parched ground. No shade, no water. There was no color in the world anymore. Nothing but gray sand, white hot sun, pale sky and clear waves of heat that radiated in the painfully dry air. Her skin burned, even the skin beneath her clothing.

It was amazing how close the mountains loomed. How could they be so close and covered in snow, which melted into springs of fresh water, and yet there was not a drop of water in sight? It was if this area had been cursed. It had been. It was cursed, and so was she. She prayed continually in her head; it had worked before, but no relief came. Had she been saved from the assassins only to parish in this way? Why? What had she ever done to deserve such a fate? It would have been better to have her head cut off.

She ran out of water, but kept the canteens hung around her neck anyway. It took too much strength to pull them off. The horse was suffering. It had slowed to a walk. She felt her tongue swelling. It felt huge in her mouth.

* * * *

THE HORSE finally stumbled and collapsed and was unable to get up. Ammey got off and walked until she, too, stumbled and collapsed. She woke when it was dark. Several pairs of

yellow eyes were watching her from a short distance away. She sat up and clapped her hands weakly. "Not dead yet," she rasped. The creatures darted a bit at the clap, but did not go far. She got to her feet slowly and began a stumbling walk. She had no idea what direction she walked in; it was merely an effort not to die. She prayed to be pointed in the right direction and she kept moving.

* * * *

ZINO HAD A BAD FEELING. Jade's severed head should have shown up by now. It was the cue for all the rest of what was to take place.

"What are we going to do?" Salvo fretted.

"Shut your mouth, that's the first thing," Zino replied quietly, but distinctly. "The walls have ears." He paced, realizing they needed a backup plan. In fact, it had been foolish not to have one in place already. Perhaps the Cortez brothers had lost track of time or lost their way. Perhaps they'd fought over the woman and killed each other. He did not know and he did not care, so long as she was dead. He'd managed to get word to one of the most loyal wolf packs, and they were now keeping watch to the southeast. Any sign of Jade, and they would kill her. Not that that was likely. The desert of Uerad was a brutal place.

For centuries, convicted criminals had been sentenced to die there. They'd called it being 'exiled,' but no one survived the heat and lack of water, not to mention the wild vrines—large, vicious, hairless wolf-like creatures native to Uerad. It was said the Leviathans trapped and ate the wild animals, but

it was hard to believe, even of Leviathans. Perhaps the brothers had fallen prey to the vrines. That made more sense than anything. It still meant he needed a backup plan. What, besides Jade's actual remains, could pass as her remains? That was the question. The answer finally dawned on him and he breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

"Of course," Salvo said when Zino came close and quietly relayed the plan. It was so obvious. Why hadn't he thought of it? "I will see to it."

* * * *

KO CAREFULLY LEANED around the edge of the cliff to reach the fat, ripe golden laurelberries. They were the secret ingredient to her ale and worth the two-day sojourns and the risks she took. Mostly, they grew in the northern region, on the cliffs above the cool foothills of the Blue Mountains, although she didn't usually come this far north.

She picked all the berries it was possible to reach, then surveyed her basket and felt satisfied it would be a successful winter batch. She retreated to safe footing and looked out over the sweeping vista. Admittedly, it was a strange view. Directly below her was the lush, green valley at the base of the foothills. Immediately beyond that, was the powdery gray wasteland of southern Uerad. There was no gentle transition between the two; it was a line.

Hassim, her uncle, had once attempted to cross the Blue Mountains. He'd only managed to summit the first peak, but it had proved to be a life changing experience. From that great altitude, he'd been able to see the entire northern country.

The most remarkable thing, he shared with anyone who would listen, was that the desert of Uerad was in the shape of a giant fist. Clearly, it was cursed by an ancient god.

Ko was no deep thinker, like Hassim, but she did know that no one traveled through the southeast side of Uerad, which is why she couldn't comprehend the sight below her at first. It looked like a woman of the Nos, and behind her—something else—something large and mostly clear yet with definite form. Ko shielded the sun's glare from her eyes and stared harder. The form seemed to be in the shape of a woman, but many, many times the size. It was as if it were almost humanlike in form, but not substance. A goddess? Was that what it was? Whatever it was, it hovered behind the struggling female.

There was movement in the form, a changing of some sort, and Ko held her breath and squinted to make it out. The goddess, for now Ko was certain it was a goddess, shifted her arms up in a graceful, dance like gesture before pulling them apart, opening a white light in the sky.

Ko lurched backwards and fell to the ground, blinded by the light. She breathed hard and clutched at the earth around her. Her vision came back slowly and with it was the absolute conviction she was to help the frail woman of the Nos. Before she started down the mountain, she saw the woman had made it to the green shade of the valley. She'd fallen to her hands and knees and was crawling to the brook.

* * * *

AMMEY CUPPED HER HAND and drank the sweet, cold water. She had never tasted anything as good. When she had her fill, she splashed water on her burnt face and collapsed onto her side, groaning. She'd been holding off death one step at a time for she didn't know how long.

She thought she felt the ground move, but she couldn't be certain. When she was certain, she slowly rolled onto her back to determine what was happening. She could not comprehend the sight in front of her for a moment, then she realized what it was; a Leviathan female moving close, observing her carefully. A Leviathan meant she was in Oisenbant, which meant she had gone from one death trap to another.

Ammey tried to sit and hold up a hand, to show she meant to harm, but then the effort struck her as funny. She meant no harm? The Leviathan woman was three feet taller and twice her width. She laughed but the laughter sapped her strength. She gave up and closed her eyes. If she was to die here and now, she would die appreciating the shade, the earth, all the good she had experienced in her life.

Until last spring, she'd lived a safe, comfortable life. She'd had a family and friends whom she loved and who had loved her. In the end, she had experienced great adventure and, hopefully, she had accomplished some good.

Ko didn't know what to make of the woman. Had the heat of the desert driven her mad? She'd been beaten. Her front was covered in rusty-brown dried blood, and one of her eyes was badly swollen. She was remarkably frail looking and weak, badly burned from the sun, covered in blisters—but she

did have a dagger. And a mad woman of the Nos with a dagger could be lethal. "I will help you," Ko said. "But you have to throw your dagger aside."

Ammey opened her eyes and looked at the woman. The Leviathan was speaking, but she could not understand the words. Neither the expression on her face nor the tone of her deep voice looked threatening, which was a relief. Ammey struggled to sit up, but she only managed to rise up on an elbow. "I don't understand."

Ko pointed to her own waist and then made a motion like she was withdrawing and tossing a dagger aside.

Ammey understood. She hesitated, thinking it was her only hope of defense, but then did as the woman bade. If the woman wanted to kill her, she would be dead soon, dagger or no.

Ko came forward slowly, picked up the dagger, and backed away. She went to her pack for dried meat strips, and brought them and the basket of freshly picked berries to the woman. She helped her to sit and eat, and, afterwards, she removed her clothes and helped her into the creek to bathe her red, blistered skin.

The fact that the Leviathan was helping was baffling. Ammey had always heard they were violent, stupid beings, yet this woman was the very opposite. The water was a shock to her system and she found herself painfully chilled. She began shivering, her teeth chattering. The leviathan noted this and quickly helped her back out and onto a fur. Ammey curled up, hurting, and the woman wrapped the fur around

her. "Thank you," Ammey whispered, hoping her gratitude was clear, even if her words were not.

* * * *

SHE WOKE WITH A START, and found herself being covered in sticky green leaves by the woman. It was morning, she realized, which meant she'd slept all of yester day and night. The woman held up a leaf to explain. "Lockasa mi phailpla." She made a circular motion with the leaf above the back of her hand. "Hep eedn tap."

"It's soothing," Ammey guessed. "You're saying it helps the burn?"

"Hep," the woman said, nodding. "Eedn tap." She motioned to her face.

"I understand," Ammey murmured. She'd felt desperately ill yesterday. She felt less so today, but still so terribly weak.

The woman came closer, closed her lips tightly and motioned to them. Ammey nodded, understanding she was not to open her mouth. The woman gestured with two fingers over her eyes, then closed her eyelids. Ammey closed her eyes and felt the woman cover her face with the leaves. The sap was cooling, soothing on contact. She wondered what tree the leaf came from. The woman placed something on her swollen eye, something wet with a light weight.

Ammey fell back asleep and woke again as the woman removed the leaves and whatever had been on her eye and helped her back into the creek to bathe. Later, the Leviathan brought her food and they ate together for the first time.

Ammey felt a desire to communicate with the woman, but how? "Amm-ey," she said, placing a hand to her chest.

"Ammey," the woman repeated easily. They were an odd-looking people, Ko thought. Their noses were so small; it was a wonder they could breathe. "Ko," she said, gesturing to herself.

"Ko," Ammey said, reverently. "I thank you for everything you've done."

Ko nodded, getting the gist of the thanks. Ammey seemed stronger, and she hoped she was. No matter what, she had to go back home today. If she didn't, Glidde would come looking for her, and he hated nos with a consuming passion. She'd seen him hang them upside down and bash their heads in for no other reason than the satisfaction it gave him. Once, two young men of the Nos made the mistake of venturing in, most likely on a dare or test of courage. Glidde had trapped them, and then crushed them one at a time. She had pleaded for their lives; they were only boys who meant no harm, but her words were not heard. Nothing was heard when nos were about. Nothing was felt, except hatred. He would not hesitate to kill a woman, either.

"Leviathan?" Ammey said, pointing to Ko, looking for any common word.

Ko nodded. She pointed back at Ammey. "Livianos." She pointed at herself, "Than," then at Ammey, "Nos."

"Levianos," Ammey repeated thoughtfully.

After the meal, Ko left Ammey with food, her dagger, a piece of flint and a stringent warning about going any direction but west. Ammey understood and told her so. Few

words exchanged between had any meaning, yet they'd shared an understanding. Ammey clearly understood that Ko had spared her life, and very possibly saved it.

* * * *

MEHR WALKED to the tent of acting General Geoffrey Tullmoore, noting the many hostile glances he was receiving. He felt an odd prickling up and down his spine, a kind of inner warning he could not yet make sense of. He approached the tent and entered, having received an urgent summons.

"You're in danger," Tullmoore informed him the instant their eyes met.

Mehr looked around at the other men in the tent and saw grim concurrence. "What's happened?"

"You've been blamed for Lady Corin's death."

"Her death?" Mehr swallowed. His knees suddenly felt weak. "I just learned they captured one of the men who abducted Jade."

"That man has blamed you," Tullmoore stated flatly. "He claims you paid him to abduct and kill her."

Mehr exhaled strongly. "That's madness! Why would I?"

"Because you could not have her for your own."

"Beck confessed under torture," Andre Smithe spoke up.

"It's a lie," Mehr hissed.

"The only question is what Corin will believe. And he has not been right since the lady went missing."

Mehr knew it was true. Marko had barely slept or eaten, and Zino spent all day and all night whispering in his ear. "Zino is behind this."

"Yet half the men in this army are loyal to him," Tullmoore said. "You must run for your life."

"We'll escort you," one of the men spoke up.

Mehr shook his head. The accusation was mind-boggling. That Marko might believe it was agonizing.

"Corin will soon hear the man's confession."

"He may be hearing it now."

"You have to go. Once you're secured somewhere, you can write a letter to your cousin explaining that you strongly deny the accusation."

They were all talking at once. Mehr couldn't think, but the lack of honor it suggested stung. "If I run, I look guilty!"

"The king is not himself," Tullmoore warned. "And the Lady Jade's severed arm was discovered, the section with his mark. It is not likely to make him more reasonable."

The thought made Mehr feel sick. "But if I go into hiding—" he began weakly.

"You live to fight another day," Tullmoore interrupted. "If you stay, you will die before the sun sets on this day. Zephyr will see to it."

The words were chilling, the truth behind them evident.

* * * *

MARKO LOOKED around his cousin's rooms as if was seeing it for the first time. He felt numb and cold from the betrayal. Xander Beck had confessed to abducting and murdering his Jade at Mehr's behest. Marko had not believed it at first, he had not been able to accept such a betrayal, but the evidence was here. Items of hers were among Mehr's

possessions and, worse, a journal that detailed everything, including a deep and abiding hatred of him. How could he have been so blind?

"Do not blame yourself, Marko," Zino spoke gently from the doorway. "I did not see it and I did not trust the man. He was very careful."

Marko held up a hand to silence him. He wanted silence. He needed silence to understand how he had lost everything in so short a time.

"I will take care of everything," Zino said, backing up and waving off the men to give Marko his privacy.

Salvo could barely contain his joy. The journal had been his idea and he alone had found the best forger in the city and had him mimic Mehr's handwriting. It had been a brilliant move. If only he could announce it and receive his due credit, he'd be perfectly content. Zino approached him looking burdened with sadness. The man was the consummate actor.

"Wipe that smirk from your face," Zino demanded in a harsh whisper.

Salvo made an attempt to look serious, but it was difficult. This was the most exciting evening of his life.

"And find Mehr and arrest him," Zino said.

Salvo nodded. The evening just kept getting better.

"We need to finish this chapter and move on," Zino continued. "I want troops moving out for Shilbridge within the week. We are behind schedule."

* * * *

"THEY ARE MARCHING on Shilbridge," the courier relayed to the roomful of men.

"In what numbers?" Anthony McKeaf asked.

"Nearly the whole of their army, sir."

Lucas McKeaf frowned at the large, military map mounted on the wall. He had suspected the peace would not last. All the stories of a reforming king who had suddenly acquired a conscience had sounded false, and this was proof of it.

"What do you think?" Amador Ayala spoke up.

Lucas held up a hand. He needed a moment to think. As much as he wished it, he could not always separate mind from heart; and his heart had been missing as long as his daughter had. For nearly seven months, they had searched, to no avail. He feared she was dead, and yet he could not accept it. His worry and grief affected his thinking, slowed it, and these were important decisions to be made.

"We should send divisions to Nawllah," Anthony spoke.

"No. Further," the McKeaf stated. "To the southeastern border of Shilbridge. Let them know what awaits if they side with Corin. We'll position half our force there."

"And the rest?" Ciro Ayala asked, stepping closer.

"The rest will go through the mountain pass and attack Bellux-Abry. Corin needs something to do back home."

There was an instant ripple of enthusiastic agreement from the twenty-six men in attendance.

"Once there, we could squeeze from both sides and crush them," Anthony spoke up.

"It would be a blood bath that would also crush Shilbridge and Ghlaxmire in the middle," Lucas stated. "No. Much of

Corin's force has been pressed into service. Give them a chance to desert a lost cause. Let Corin's army disintegrate from the inside." He turned to Richard. "Get out the order that every available man must come at once."

"Where shall they be told to come?" David asked.

"We'll set up a base camp on the other side of the forest, outside of Lere." Lucas decided. "There, each man will go through training before going into battle. Select a handful of men who'll be responsible for the training." Lucas turned back to the study the map. "Our move will take Corin by surprise and he'll return to the city to defend. I want our troops gone before they get there."

Anthony frowned. "They're to attack and leave?"

"They are to sustain the attack until the army is sighted returning."

"But what if we can take the city?" Anthony challenged.

"We neither need nor want it," his father said. "Our purpose is to stop Corin's aggression."

"But if we can take it—"

"Then we'll be able to take it later."

Anthony disagreed, but his father seemed adamant. It took great effort, but he kept his mouth shut.

"We should move," Amador boomed. "Time is wasting."

A man appeared in the door, looking sheepish and apologetic. "Another Ammey McKeaf has come," he said.

Richard sighed. "I will go."

"It's not necessary," Amador said, incensed by another false claim. He glared at the messenger. "Go tell her if we bother to send a man to investigate her claim and it proves to

be false, she'll earn ten stripes for our trouble. Tell her that." He glared around the room. "Let it be the new rule. Before a woman is brought back here, explain it to her. Too much manpower is being wasted on this."

Lucas pressed on the bridge of his nose, plagued by another pounding headache.

Dane saw and felt for his father. He'd suffered greatly since Ammey had gone missing. "Should anyone remain behind to cover the Forge?" he asked, hoping to distract him.

Lucas blew out a breath. "Yes. A small division. None of our best warriors."

"Let's get to it," Anthony urged, energized by the thought of renewed action.

* * * *

AMMEY TOOK HER CLOTHES OFF and waded out into the cold water with the spear she'd just sharpened. She bent and focused on the movement within the water. Clearing her mind of everything but the fish she needed, she waited. She saw a large, whiskered fish come closer, attracted, it seemed, to her legs. She drew a slow breath, not moving, waiting. It came closer, close enough and she speared it.

She dressed again, roasted the fish, and picked the good meat from its bones. She had never caught or cleaned fish, hunted or survived on her own until these last weeks. Nor had she ever imagined the country was so large that one could walk for so many days and never see a village or another living soul.

She located the North Star, checked the position against the fleeting lightened sky in the west and began walking in a southern direction. Nights were cold and she didn't have a bedroll, so she walked until she dropped from exhaustion. She had to find shelter soon.

A large bird swooped and hovered gracefully over the surface of the river looking for a fish. Black snakes suddenly surfaced behind it, swimming fast. One shot up, its long body altering to nearly square-like in mid-air, yet before it struck, it was snakelike again. Ammey watched with dread fascination as other snakes leapt and clung on to the screaming bird. The venom must have been incapacitating because the bird went down screaming and disappeared into the water.

She shivered and stepped into a hole, twisting her weak left ankle again. She cried out and went down, the ankle throbbing to the rhythm of her heartbeat. A black snake shot out of the water. Holding her breath, she turned fearfully to study the surface of the water. The center of the lake came alive as countless snakes surfaced and swam toward her. She crawled backwards on hands and feet, grunting in pain every time her left foot pushed off. The snakes swam fast. As they neared the bank, they leapt into the air before disappearing back into the water. Ammey kept backing, terrified of an attack, but the lake grew still. The snakes had disappeared as mysteriously as they'd appeared.

She tried to get to her feet, but the pain in her ankle was too sharp. A whimper slipped from her, born of fatigue and

fear, and for the first time since leaving home, she broke down and cried like a child.

* * * *

ALEXANDER KIEVNALL PEERED through his spyglass at the palace of Bellux-Abry. It was truly spectacular. He shifted the eyepiece left. "Guards posted all around," he noted. "It looks like a single battalion left in camp."

David McKeaf, standing next to him and studying the same view concurred. "We'll attack at daybreak," he decided. "Take out the camp." He lowered his spyglass and looked back at the men in his command who were awaiting orders. "No more loss of civilian life than necessary. Destruction of property is what we're after. We need to hit what Corin most values."

* * * *

HAVING BEEN ALERTED to a situation, Marko Corin and Nafino Zephyr topped the hill to gain the best vantage point. Zino lifted his spyglass to his eye and Marko lifted his goblet of wine to his mouth, both of them fixated on the ranks of men forming on the opposite side of the Rhannalinx River.

"I'll be damned," Zino breathed.

It occurred to Marko what an appropriate comment Zino had made. He, too, was damned; it was certain. No one lost everyone in their life they cared about unless they were damned. Was that not the very definition?

"You may want to slow your drinking," Zino suggested. "Seeing that they have come to us."

Marko narrowed his eyes at Zino, having discerned a tone of superiority. "Never forget who you're talking to," Corin warned.

Zino lowered the spyglass and offered it to Marko. "War is a messy business, sire. You will need your wits about you."

Marko took the spyglass in hand and watched as Zino turned and started back down the hill. Had it been his imagination or had that been a veiled threat? He turned and looked over the battalions of men on the far side of the river. "How many men would you say?" he asked the officers who'd gathered around him.

"Perhaps three thousand," was the first estimation.

"I'd say four," another spoke up.

"I agree," a third offered.

"Then we should have no concern," Corin said. "We have more than double their number."

"It is not the number, sire, it is ... the men," one of the officer's ventured as carefully as possible.

Corin looked at the man for an explanation.

"The living war heroes of our country are down there. The McKeaf, he's the tall, broad shouldered man with the fair hair in the center of the front left flank," the man said, pointing him out.

"Lowell Swain, Peter Bloodworth," one of the others listed, moving closer. "These men are living legends."

"And then you have the champions of the Azulland Games. They're down there, too. The Mosers, the McKeafs, Eli Jones, Robert Todd."

"War heroes and champions," Corin mused. "And who do they think we are?"

"The army of Bellux-Abry," the man standing closest to Corin replied steadily.

"Who attacks—" Corin said slowly.

"Because we can. Because there should be one king of Azulland."

Zino had trained them well, Marko realized. He had trained them all well. He turned abruptly and went back down the hill.

The officers stayed put and continued to study the enemy across the river. Behind the formed ranks, men worked to set up camp.

"They cannot win against an army that's double their number," Captain Thomas Bisset said lightly. He was the youngest of them and new to his rank, and felt it as the others turned to look at him with mild disgust, as if he knew nothing.

* * * *

MARKO ENTERED HIS TENT and saw Eskarne stretched out on his fur, naked. Her presumption grated on his nerves. "What are you doing here?"

"I begged to be allowed to come so that I might provide you with distraction and pleasure, my lord."

He walked to the table and poured himself another helping of wine. "I'm going to need more wine soon. You can help by fetching that."

She raised up on an elbow. "I've been with you hundreds of times," she said in a low, silky voice. "I know what you enjoy. Allow me help you to forget," she cooed. Marko's eyes suddenly went cold and she felt painful gooseflesh break out over her entire body.

"Forget?"

His look was so menacing, she sat the rest of the way up and considered bolting from his presence. "F-forget the pending battle, sire," she said uncertainly.

He stuck a finger out at her, and it shook with fury. "Had you uttered her name, I would have had your tongue cut out."

This was not the way she had imagined it. She suddenly wished she had remained at home.

* * * *

ZINO WAS SHAKEN AWAKE by an aide. "What?" he barked. "What is it?"

"The city's being attacked," the man reported.

Zino sat. "What city?"

"Bellux-Abry, my lord. A rider made it through. And there's great, black smoke. You'll see it."

Zino rubbed his face. "Go tell Corin! Get the men up!" "They are up, lord."

"Go!" Zino said as he got to his feet. "We must return at once."

PABEBREAK

CHAPTER 8: The Men of Keved

THE SEVEN MEN sat around the campfire roasting quail.

"That's not what they said," Garid Lourd stated, shaking his head. "Everyone doesn't get a choice."

"It is," Jansen argued.

"No. We got a choice because we've fought. If you've no training, you must go to the training camp."

"Listen to that music," Peter John said, cocking his head. They quieted.

"What music?" Fin asked.

"The tree frogs, crickets, the night wind," Peter John replied. He looked at the Lourd brothers. "Your blatherin' on was drowning it out."

Garid shook his head and pulled his bird from the fire to check its doneness.

The small group was headed to the camp at Stonewater Forge. A fortnight ago, a courier had brought them news and a mandate to come join the combined forces of Azulland. They'd completed winter preparations for their families, and were now trekking south.

"The camp at Shilbridge is set," Garid said, continuing the discussion.

"They're the first line of defense," Jansen said. "That's where we should be."

"I've always been partial to the back line of defense, myself," Darius spoke up. "Safer."

"They're set," Garid repeated. "They are not in need of men there."

"Besides," Peter John spoke up. "Chances are, we're stuck somewhere for the winter. At least it's warmer in the southern valley."

"Precisely," Garid replied. "Not to mention it's said to be a cleaner camp, there's advanced training available—"

"It's decided," Jansen blurted. "It's already decided. The point is, it would have been nice to have a consensus."

"Alright," Garid snapped, sick of his brother's grousing.
"Let's have a consensus. Who's for going to Stonewater
Forge?"

All hands were raised except Jansen's.

"I mean, if we have to go anywhere," Samuel spoke up.

"Personally speaking, I'd rather be back in my own lodge pressing indecent-like against my wife and hearing her tell me to saw it off; how she's not in the mood."

"She ever in the mood, Samuel?" Lott asked.

"You see any little versions of me running around?" Samuel asked.

There was a general chuckling.

"How long you think it will take to get to the Forge?"

Darius asked.

"Depends on the weather," Fin replied. "Ten days. Twelve days."

Garid nodded.

"I'd say someone else is heading that way," Peter John spoke up, noticing a distant campfire ahead.

"That could be anything," Jansen rejoined.

"Do you have to disagree with anything anyone says?" Garid asked.

"I don't do that," Jansen snapped. He looked around for support, but found all eyes conspicuously averted.

"Your bird is on fire," Garid said.

Jansen made a sound of disgust as he withdrew his supper and began blowing out the flames.

* * * *

THE MEN STARED down at the woman. Her long, golden curls cascaded around a pile of dried leaves she had mounded together as a pillow. One by one, they glanced up at the enormous, ancient cereno tree, covered in vicious namesake monkeys, and shook their heads. "How'd she survive that?" Lott mused.

"Miss?" Garid called to her. "Uh, Miss?"

Ammey jerked awake and found herself staring at several pairs of boots. She looked up and squinted to make out the faces of the astonished-looking men. She reached for her walking stick and got up awkwardly, embarrassed at being caught sleeping. She was not aware of how many leaves clung to her hair and clothes.

"That ankle looks bad," Peter John stated. It was swollen to twice its normal size.

Surprising, conflicting emotions pulsed through her. She was as thrilled and relieved as she was wary and guarded. She'd been so long without seeing people, she'd lost all track of time. She often felt as though she'd lost track of her sanity. "Yes, I ... I twisted it," she said.

"Miss, do you know what that is?" Garid Lourd asked, pointing at the tree.

Ammey looked at the tree then back to him. "A large tree?"

"It is a large *cereno* tree," he corrected. "Have you heard of those?"

She had, but she couldn't quite access what the cereno tree was known for. Her mind was not quite clear yet.

"Home to the meat-eating, even-thin-women-will-donicely, cereno monkeys?" Fin Lourd spoke up for the first time.

He was remarkably handsome with thick, fair hair he'd pulled back into a tail. All the men had long hair worn in that style. They ranged from their mid-twenties to their early thirties or so. "I don't see any monkeys," she said weakly, picking a leaf from her tangled hair.

"They blend," Fin said, stretching the word out. "Watch," he said, pointing at the tree.

She turned and studied the large tree. Not one monkey hung from its limbs. Was she being set up for a joke of some kind? Fin clapped and yelled and some of the other men joined in. For a moment, she would have sworn the tree had sprung to life, but it was the massive creatures that slept clinging to its bark, limbs and branches, concealed perfectly by their coats of brown, gray and deep green. Diamond-shaped white eyes suddenly blinked menacingly, startling Ammey, and she took a step backwards onto her bad ankle, which gave out. If not for the quick reflex of the large, muscular, redheaded man, she would have fallen directly onto her backside. He caught her with a gentle, "Got 'cha."

The men backed away from the tree and she was moved with them.

"I don't know why they didn't attack," Garid said. "They're wary of numbers, but they usually attack any lone creature that strays too close, and you were close."

"Why are you out here alone?" the redheaded man asked. His tone was gentle, his blue eyes kind. He reminded her a bit of Kidder, not in terms of appearance. They were similar in nature.

"It's a long explanation," she hedged. "I'm going south." "So are we," he said.

Jansen wanted to groan. They couldn't take her with them; she couldn't walk. She'd slow them down and it would be spring before they got to the Forge.

All the men were noticing her lack of provisions.

"Let's break for some food," Garid suggested.

"We never break this early," Jansen said in a slow monotone that accurately relayed his displeasure.

"We do today," Peter John said cheerfully. He removed his pack and rummaged through it.

"I'm Garid Lourd of Keved," a man with dark hair said.

Ammey guessed he was their leader. He had rather deeply set eyes and a calm, intelligent look about him.

"Where south?" he asked conversationally.

She blinked, not comprehending the question at first.

"Oh," she replied when she collected her wits. "Stonewater Forge." She was suddenly painfully aware of what a mess she looked. She could see the men silently observing her badly stained clothing. She had to look like a beggar.

"Why?" Garid asked. His expression was one of grave concern.

"Why?" she repeated.

"We heard no women were allowed in camp," the handsome fair-haired man spoke up again. He had hazel eyes and long, dark eyelashes.

She frowned, not understanding what camp he was referring to.

"This is Fin," Garid introduced. "Fin Lourd, my cousin. And this is Jansen, my brother."

"Here you go, Miss," the redheaded man said, offering her a strip of smoked meat.

"Thank you," she replied, accepting it.

"I'm Peter John Graves," the redheaded man introduced.

"And that's Darius, Lott and Samuel," Garid added, pointing at each as he named them. They each bobbed their heads at her.

"Ma'am," Lott said.

"Miss," Darius nodded. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"And yours," she returned. "I haven't seen anyone in weeks."

Garid cocked his head. "Where are you coming from?"

She averted her eyes, not willing to divulge that information. It was much too long and involved a story. "North."

Jansen snorted. "That's general. Where?"

His question was pointed enough that the others scowled at him.

"I can see where this is going," he complained under his breath.

"Shut up, Jansen," Samuel said.

"We didn't get your name," Peter John said.

"Ammey McKeaf," she replied. The pleasant looks on the men's faces faded, and Ammey swallowed, stung by the strong, negative reaction. She'd never encountered any stranger that wasn't impressed, even awed, by her family.

"Ammey McKeaf," Garid repeated, looking around at the other men.

"Yet another," Jansen spoke up in a droll voice, hoping this discovery would persuade the others to leave her. She could hobble in on her own in the spring and not humiliate them for having transported her there.

Ammey shook her head, not understanding. "Wha—what do you mean?" she stammered.

Garid felt for the young woman. She was obviously in a bad way. They'd been told that scores of young women from all over the country had claimed to be the long-lost daughter of the McKeaf in order to be transported to the Forge. It was a claim born of desperation because their men were all there. He understood the predicament that left them in, but the McKeafs had had their fill of the false claims. "If you're Ammey McKeaf, what are you doing out here?"

She frowned. Why were they challenging who she was? "Trying to make my way home."

"Let her eat," Peter John urged. "Let's all eat."

"Miss, you can't claim to be Ammey McKeaf," Samuel spoke up. Someone had to explain the consequences before she walked all the way to the southern valley.

"Will you please let her eat?" Peter John insisted.

"I don't understand," Ammey said.

"There have been a number of false claims," Garid explained.

What were they talking about? "False claims?"

Garid nodded. "If you claim to be Ammey McKeaf, and you're not, they'll whip you."

She shook her head, not able to comprehend what they were talking about. Who would claim to be her? Why would anyone? Obviously no one could pass for her. It made no sense. Tears sprang to her eyes because she was so fatigued and the situation so bizarre.

"The best thing is to turn around and go back to where you came from," Garid said gently.

"I am!" she cried. "That's what I'm trying to do!"

"Will you let her eat?" Peter John roared.

Garid held up his hands in concession and Ammey wiped at her tears angrily and bit into the meat. It was hard and then chewy but the flavor was good, and she was very hungry.

No one spoke for a few minutes.

"We should go into the next village and buy a mule for her to ride," Peter John suggested. He looked at her with a sheepish expression. "You shouldn't be on that ankle."

"That's out of our way," Jansen disagreed.

"It's not so out of our way," Garid said, glaring at his brother. They could not leave her, not in the shape she was in. She wouldn't survive.

"And who's going to pay for it?" Jansen challenged.

"I will," Peter John said. "So try not to be such an arse."

"Thank you," Ammey said to Peter John. "My family will pay you back." She saw the doubtful looks exchanged between men. She raised her chin in defiance and fought back fresh tears.

"For now, I'll carry you on my back," Peter John offered. "Oh, no. I can walk," Ammey replied.

* * * *

THEY STARTED FORWARD tentatively and she kept up. It took her full concentration until she could discover her rhythm. Of course, they'd probably slowed their pace to accommodate her. "If I fall behind, I'll catch up when you stop," she panted, already wearing from the pace. Besides which, she needed to stop and empty her bladder.

"I could break off," Peter John said to Garid. "—go into Rossborough and meet back up with you.

Samuel nodded. "I'll go with him."

"Agreed," Garid agreed. It made sense to get her something to ride so they were not so slowed.

The two men went one direction and Ammey excused herself and went the other, toward the cover of trees.

"Watch for cereno trees," Fin called.

"Shut up, Fin," Darius said.

The men stopped and waited for her to return.

"You think it could be true?" Lott asked.

"That's she's Ammey McKeaf?" Garid asked. "And in all of Azulland, we just happened to stumble upon her?" His wry look left no doubt to his opinion.

"We've got to talk her out of making the claim," Darius stated.

Garid nodded. That was precisely what he'd been thinking. "We have plenty of time to do it. We need to discover where she comes from and what she's seeking. Things were probably difficult at home. They'd have to be to strike out on your own like she did."

"After a husband?" Lott suggested wishfully.

Fin shook his head. "How does any woman think they can get away with such a claim?"

"They don't," Garid replied. "They simply want to be somewhere there's protection."

"She's coming," Lott warned.

* * * *

THEY DIDN'T CONVERSE again until they stopped for a mid-day break. Garid could not help but notice how exhausted their new companion was. She looked ashen. "I think we'll wait here for Peter John and Samuel," he announced. Jansen opened his mouth to complain and Garid turned a full-fledge scowl on him. "Go hunt us up some dinner," he ordered.

"I'll go," Fin said.

"So will I," Lott seconded.

"I'll get a fire going," Darius said. He walked off to collect wood.

Ammey sat and stretched out her legs. Her ankle looked terrible. It was red and hot to the touch. "Keved—," she said, trying to picture it on a mental map. "That's north of Nawallah?"

"Northeast," Garid replied.

"How do you know about Stonewater Forge?"

"There's a gathering there, a military camp," Garid explained.

The camp Fin had referred to earlier.

"Some men stopped by our village a fortnight ago with news of the siege on Bellux-Abry and—" He saw the shock on her face. "What is it?"

She shook her head. "W-what happened?"

"You mean the siege? Oh, it was a diversionary tactic," he explained quickly. "Do you know Bellux-Abry?" he asked, wondering at her stricken look. "Is that where you're from?"

"It's where I started this leg of my journey from," she replied carefully. "What do you mean diversionary tactic?"

"Corin's army marched into Shilbridge."

She breathed out slowly. She felt tingly and strange.

"You didn't know that either," he surmised.

She shook her head.

"Tell me your name," Garid asked gently.

She felt drained. "I told you my name. I can tell you don't believe it, but it's true." She closed her eyes, too exhausted to do this anymore. She just wanted to lie down and sleep. Waking didn't matter. She just wanted to sleep.

Everything had changed since the time she'd left Bellux-Abry. Marko had changed or he'd been tricked. He was in control of something terrible or he wasn't in control; she just didn't know. One thing was certain, fighting had occurred. Death and injuries had occurred. While she'd been traveling, fighting to survive, Corin's army had threatened Shilbridge and Bellux-Abry had been counter attacked by her father's army. She couldn't think straight. She could not reason it all out.

Garid got up and unrolled his sleeping fur for her. She did not look well. "Here," he offered. "You should rest."

She didn't argue. She didn't even have the strength to thank him. She laid down and fell into a deep sleep.

* * * *

IT WAS DARK when she woke and a fire was crackling nearby. All the men were sitting around it. Their conversation was a soft, soothing drone.

"Ammey?" Peter John called. "Are you awake?"

Her name had never sounded sweeter. She was grateful to Peter John for using it.

"You should eat," he added.

"Do you ever say anything else?" Fin asked as he got to his feet. He walked over to her with a bowl. "Here," he said, handing it to her. "Unless you feel up to being sociable."

She accepted the bowl. "Thank you."

"Some meat and eggs," Fin said. He squatted in front of her. "We have a mule for you to ride. It will make the going easier." He paused, hoping she'd say something, but she was

too addlebrained with fatigue. "I'll get you something to drink," he said, standing back up. He walked back to the fire, aware of the smirks on more than a few faces. "What?" he snapped.

"Nothing," Samuel spoke up quickly, but with an irritating grin on his face. "Nothing at all."

* * * *

AMMEY WAS THE FIRST TO WAKE. She sat up and realized she'd taken Garid's bedroll for the night, forcing the others to double up. She retrieved her stick, got up and limped off to find a private place to pass her water. Not far from camp, she found a creek to drink from and wash in. The men were just stirring to life when she got back.

"You look better," Peter John observed cheerfully.

"I feel better," she admitted. "At least, I feel halfway alive."

Peter John handed her a bundle of gray wool. "I got you that to wear and a coat."

She smiled at him and unrolled the bundle. It was a rather shapeless surcoat. It wasn't attractive but, at least, she could finally take off the badly stained overgown. "I appreciate it, Peter John," she said sincerely. "Thank you."

"Well, you need the coat, for certain," he said, waving off her thanks.

She nodded. "Nights have been very cold."

"Let's eat and get going," Garid said.

* * * *

THEY MADE GOOD PROGRESS over the next several days until the wind picked up and gray sky grew increasingly threatening.

"The sky is going to open up and pour," Jansen yelled to be heard.

"Keep your eyes open for a cave," Garid yelled. He'd already sent Samuel and Fin out in search of one, but they hadn't been seen since.

They topped a ridge, everyone bent against the wind, and Ammey caught a glimpse of the familiar—the finger lakes. She'd seen them when she'd traveled from Draven to Daleog with Graybil. They were near Daleog.

"Here—" a distant male voice yelled.

Ammey turned her head and saw Samuel waving from the top of a ridge. "Peter John," she yelled. He was leading the mule directly in front of her, but the wind was so noisy she had to call twice before he turned. She pointed to Samuel. Peter John saw and broke into a clumsy jog to alert Garid.

* * * *

ALTHOUGH THE STORM HOWLED outside, the cave seemed quiet with the wind out of their ears.

"This is better," Peter John remarked.

They built a fire, set out their furs and settled in to wait out the storm.

"I have a feeling this storm will last awhile," Garid said.

"It'll last as long as it lasts," Samuel replied.

"Samuel's idea of waxing poetic," Fin remarked.

Ammey had ended up sitting next to him.

"Oh, no, no, no," Samuel said. "If you want poetry, I can deliver poetry."

Lott moaned.

"There once was a woman from Draven," Samuel began.

He was drowned out by a chorus of objection and gave up, laughing.

"We have time to hear your story, now," Fin suggested to Ammey.

"Let's have some drink," Darius suggested.

"Yes," Peter John seconded. "Let's."

Three flasks were produced. Fin handed Ammey one for the first sip. She tasted it, but couldn't make out what it was, besides strong. "What is it?"

"We call it the drink," Peter John explained.

"So?" Fin asked.

"Why don't you all tell me your stories," she hedged.

"Then you'll tell yours?" Fin asked.

"I suppose I owe you that," she agreed.

"I'll tell everyone's," Fin suggested. "Starting with our resident poet."

Samuel extended his hands magnanimously. "That would be me."

"Samuel is married."

"I am married," Samuel repeated. "Although my wife is mean."

There was a general chuckling at his grim pronouncement.

"Fortunately, I've always been attracted to mean women," he concluded cheerfully.

"Garid is married and he has two sons," Fin continued.

Garid was staring into the fire. Only the smile that played on his lips gave away the pride and love he felt at the mention of his family. "How old are your sons?" Ammey asked.

"Seven and nearly ten," he replied.

"Jansen has a wife and daughter."

"I have goats," Peter John spoke up. "Great, wooly goats that give sweet milk. I miss them."

"Our village is small, compared to most. It's quiet, peaceful. Anything else to tell?" Fin asked, looking around.

"We all farm," Darius added.

"If that's your idea of a story," Ammey said slowly, "—this will be easy. I don't have any children or goats."

Lott slapped his leg and laughed. "That's fair."

"And," Ammey added, "I've done little farming. I did help with the planting last spring in Daleog."

"Daleog?" Fin asked.

She nodded briefly.

"When were you in Bellux-Abry?" Garid asked Ammey.

"Summer."

"Bellux-Abry is a long way from Stonewater Forge," Jansen noted.

She looked into the fire. "Yes, it is."

"Are you really Ammey McKeaf?" Samuel asked.

She looked at him. "Yes."

"Because you'll be in a lot of trouble if you say you are and you aren't. We might, as well. Do you understand that?"

"I am," she restated calmly.

"When did you leave home?" Garid asked.

"My father sent me. There had been some attacks south of us. He and my brothers were involved in planning a defense and they worried about keeping me safe. I was escorted to Wydenyl—"

"Wydenyl," Lott exclaimed.

"But it was attacked," Jansen challenged.

"Just as we arrived," Ammey replied. "The men who were escorting me were killed."

"Go on," Garid encouraged.

"I—" Words suddenly failed her.

"What is it?" Peter John asked.

She shook her head. "I've been so caught up in all that's happened, I never really thought about how—"

"What?"

"How it sounds."

"Just blurt it out," Peter John suggested.

"You've heard of Forzenay's Five?" she asked slowly.

"Of course," Darius replied.

"They were there, in Wydenyl. They rescued me. They'd learned of the siege and come to warn the villagers."

"So, the country's greatest assassins rescue you?" Jansen repeated, his voice dripping with scorn. "This story gets better and better."

"Shut it, Jansen," Lott snapped. He turned to Ammey and his expression softened. "Go on."

Peter John had been right. She just needed to blurt out the story. She drew breath. "We went to Draven, where we

[&]quot;Spring."

[&]quot;Why?" Garid asked.

assassinated a division of men and their leaders, then I returned with one of the Five to his home in Daleog, but the village was attacked by Corin's men and I was taken hostage, with many others, and taken to Bellux-Abry."

No one spoke. No one even drank.

"And you got free from Corin's men?" Samuel asked slowly.

She sighed audibly. Everything was such a long story and then they did not believe her. And would she, had the situation been reversed? True or not, the story sounded like a wildly constructed tale. "They know who I am in Daleog," she offered weakly.

"We aren't going into Daleog," Jansen spoke up.

"We are now," Garid announced.

Everyone looked at him.

"If she's speaking the truth, and you hear how fantastic it is, which does not mean it is not the truth—" he added consolingly.

"You've already lost me," Lott said.

"Her story is not going to get less fantastic. She'll need verification. If the residents of Daleog can verify any of it, that goes a long way. If not—" He broke off and looked directly at Ammey. "Then you will agree to wait there for us. You will not go on to the Forge."

"Agreed," she said without hesitation.

Her instant agreement took them all by surprise.

"Agreed," Garid echoed. "Good."

"Your ankle is looking better," Peter John said, as cheerful as ever. He handed a flask back to her. "Do you want to hear about my goats?"

* * * *

THE STORM BROKE the next day and, one by one, they left the cave. Fin, who was hanging back, reached out and stopped Ammey before she followed. Only the two of them were left. It felt awkward because he'd slept next to her and had slipped an arm around her during the night. The warmth had been wonderful, but the intimacy it created left some residual feeling of attachment.

"I want to say something," he said haltingly.

"Alright," she agreed.

"Sometimes ... in life, you can desire one thing, and move toward it, but perhaps, along the way you can decide you want something else. Do you understand?"

She let out a breath, wondering how to respond. "I believe so."

"Keved is a good place, filled with good people," he went on. "We have fertile soil and the mountains protect us from the harsh northern winds. It's a good place."

"I appreciate what you're saying," Ammey said slowly.

"What I'm offering," he corrected.

"I understand," she said softly. "I do, but I am who I say I am."

Fin considered her and then gave a brief nod, giving up for the present. He'd stated his case and hopefully it would have

her thinking. When no one in Daleog could support her story, he'd try again.

* * * *

IANTHE WAS KNEADING DOUGH when she heard Ammey's name being shouted. She stopped and listened to the excitement outside. She reached for a cloth, wiped her hands and covered the dough, then hurried from the lodge to see what was happening. She could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw Ammey being led in on the back of a mule.

The men of Keved could scarcely believe their ears as they heard Ammey name repeated over and over. Not only that, but she was being welcomed as if she was a conquering heroine. Eyes were alight; faces were joyous. Everyone came at them at once, reaching for her and talking excitedly.

"Are you hurt?" a woman called to her.

"Did he set you free?"

"-so glad you're safe!"

"Ammey! You're here!"

A young woman with red hair and a baby in her arms was crying and waving.

"Stop, please," Ammey begged.

Peter John helped Ammey down and she hobbled to Kira.

"Alea was safe," Kira was saying. "You were right! Ianthe cared for her. And Cyrus survived. He survived."

Ammey embraced her and the baby. "I'm so happy for you."

"Who are you?" a woman asked Darius.

"We're from Keved," he explained. "On our way to Stonewater Forge."

"I want to hear everything," Ammey said to Kira. It was impossible to have a conversation amidst the jostling and the noise, but she desperately wanted to know what had happened to them once she'd been taken away. The mere fact that they were alive generated a pulse of vigor throughout her body, lending her strength. She was told they had set free, but she had not known if it was true until now.

Kira was nodding. "I'm so happy you're free."

"What happened to Catherin?" Ammey asked.

Kira's smile dimmed and she shook her head, and Ammey's heart plunged.

"Ammey," Ianthe said, finally reaching her.

"Ianthe!"

They embraced. Ammey looked terrible, thin and haggard, and it left Ianthe at a loss for words. "You've been in prayers every day."

"Where's Liani?"

Ianthe smiled. "Off somewhere, as usual."

"What happened with Corin?" someone called.

"How's your arm?"

"You've a thousand questions to answer," Ianthe smiled apologetically. They hustled forward and Ianthe put an arm around Ammey. "Lean on me."

"Where's Flynn?" Ammey asked. "Have you seen him?"

"They were all here. Looking for you. Worried for you."

Ammey blinked back tears. She wanted to hear more, but this wasn't the time.

"I'll tell you all about it later," Ianthe promised.

The group moved into an open-air shelter, and food and drinks appeared quickly after.

"What was that about your arm?" Garid asked, Ammey as he helped her to a seat.

She felt overwhelmed by all the explanations still to be made. "I'll explain later."

"Looks like you'll be continuing on with us," Fin remarked in a strained voice.

Ammey noticed he was avoiding looking at her. He seemed vastly disappointed, and she was unaccountably touched, realizing he had wanted to come to her rescue. He was so handsome and so desirable. Surely, he knew how desirable he was. He would have many choices. Most women would be honored and thrilled by his attention. She was honored by it. It's just that her heart was bound.

Liani ran at Ammey and was barely restrained before she reached her.

"Slowly," Ianthe chastised.

Ammey held out her arms and was rewarded by a great hug.

"What happened to Catherin?" Ammey asked Ianthe, who was sitting next to her.

"She was sold, before they ever got to the market," Ianthe said sadly.

Ammey felt crushed. She could still see Catherin's large, dark eyes so clearly.

"But Kira said the family seemed genuinely interested in her. Even kind," Ianthe continued. "Perhaps she was adopted. That's what I like to think."

"Your ankle is still hurt?" Nasim asked.

"Nasim!" Ammey swiped at her eyes and reached out a hand for him. He'd grown since she'd last seen him. "I twisted it again not long ago."

"Everyone, take a step back from them," Athalia commanded. "Give them some space to breathe and eat, for pity's sake."

Everyone did as she commanded, many of them taking seats along the bench-strewn tables.

"I didn't get any of their names," Athalia remarked, sitting across from one of the men.

"Garid Lourd, of Keved," he introduced. "And these are my kinsmen." He introduced each of the men individually.

"Welcome, men of Keved," Athalia returned. "How did you come by our friend?"

"Fate, I suppose," Garid replied. "We were traveling the same way."

"Did Corin set you free?" Athalia asked Ammey.

"No." She hesitated from saying more. She simply did not feel up to lengthy explanations. Even the thought of it drained her.

"Let her eat," Ianthe urged, "As you said."

"Perhaps, someone could explain what happened while we eat," Garid suggested. "As Darius said, we're on our way to Stonewater Forge. Ammey may need some confirmation of

what she has to tell once we get there. We'd like to be able to provide it."

"We're happy to," Ianthe said firmly. "Perhaps I should start, since she saved my life that day, and my daughter's." "And mine," Kira spoke up.

Ammey saw the man standing by Kira's side and smiled. He nodded and smiled back at her. "We're all grateful to her," Cyrus spoke up.

"I can see that," Garid returned quietly.

"It was mid-day when I heard screaming," Ianthe began.

* * * *

THE MEN OF KEVED were given the guest lodge to sleep in and Ammey went to the Graybil's lodge. The women waited until Liani slept to get into the subject Ammey most wanted to.

"They left here and went to seek the seidhkona's counsel," Ianthe explained. "Vincent," she said, smiling and shaking her head. "He wanted to go straight to Bellux-Abry. Left to his own devices, he would have stormed the palace, I'm certain."

Ammey looked into her mug of tea and swirled the last of it. Dark tealeaves went around and around.

"What happened in Bellux-Abry?" Ianthe asked tenderly.

Ammey looked up at her. "Marko Corin made me his wife," she explained quietly.

Ianthe gasped.

"I told him my name was Jade. He thought I was from this village."

"How terrible," Ianthe said, blinking back tears.

Ammey shook her head. "It wasn't so terrible. He was kind to me."

Ianthe blinked. "They said he tortured you."

"At first, he was cruel," Ammey admitted. "But ... later, he grew to be kind. He thought I'd lost my memory and he wanted to create an entirely different situation than the truth. He made up a new life for me, for us, and started to believe it. He began to reform."

"Reform?"

Ammey rubbed her arms and felt conflict pull at her. She felt the need to defend him but then she felt as if she had sold part of her soul in doing so. How would she ever make anyone understand?

Ianthe saw the pain her friend was in. She'd not only been physically damaged, but her mental faculties had obviously been altered.

"Where are the Five now?" Ammey asked.

"They're in Shilbridge, trying to keep an annexation with Bellux-Abry from happening. Flynn returned home after their trip to see Milainah." She smiled. "He's sharing more now than before, which I'm glad for. And he's promised to be home by winter."

"I'm glad," Ammey replied sincerely.

"You must be so anxious to get home."

Ammey nodded.

"What is it?" Ianthe pressed, concerned by Ammey's haunted look.

"I am anxious to see my family," Ammey said slowly. "Less anxious to have them see me."

"Oh, Ammey. They'll be so glad," Ianthe assured her.
Ammey nodded, knowing it was true, but her eyes filled.
"Explanations are difficult," she whispered.

Ianthe leaned forward and took hold of her hand. "They'll be thankful to have you home. That's all they'll care about."

"You don't know my family," Ammey said darkly. "How will I ever explain?"

* * * *

THE MEN OF KEVED settled in to sleep, but felt too restless, despite the soothing tapping of a steady rain.

"So she's really Ammey McKeaf," Lott said, introducing the topic that was on all their minds.

"All we've confirmed is everything that happened after she got here," Garid said. "The village was attacked and she was taken prisoner with several of the others and taken to Bellux-Abry."

"I can't believe he had her marked," Peter John said. "I saw it with my own two eyes and I still cannot believe it. The warrior's mark ... on her."

"How do you think her father will handle that?" Darius asked.

"Here's the question. How do we know she's truly Ammey McKeaf?" Garid posed. "She *said* so. That's what the villagers were told."

"You think it's possible she might not be?" Samuel asked doubtfully.

"He's right," Fin said, seeing Garid's point. "She said so, but who can confirm that? All that's been confirmed is what happened after she arrived here."

"Supposedly brought by Ianthe Graybil's husband," Jansen spoke up. "But where is he? Why was he not present to welcome her back?"

"We are taking her on with us, aren't we?" Darius asked.

"Yes," Garid replied. "But we still have to be cautious, especially in speaking for her. That's all I'm saying."

Fin settled back on his bedroll, suddenly less agitated than before. It was still a long way to Stonewater Forge. He still had a chance to convince her of his worth and of a good future in Keyed.

* * * *

"THIS TIME, we leave a force behind, sufficient to protect the city," Corin spoke as he paced. His voice echoed in the great hall due to the fact it was nearly empty. Only his top dozen advisors were in attendance. His city and his palace had sustained considerable damage while they had languished in Shilbridge. It had been poor planning, and that made him livid.

"How many men?" Voreskae asked.

"A thousand," Corin replied, coldly. He fixed Voreskae with a hard stare, not liking his smug tone. "Then we divide our men into three divisions. One will march back into Shilbridge and see that they join our forces. If not, we attack there first."

"They will join us," Zino said.

"If so, we push forward to destroy the enemy camp. The second division will travel down the river and meet us there, and the third will go through the mountain pass."

"Effectively cutting off all routes to us," Zino said, nodding with approval.

"All three divisions will converge at the same time," Corin continued.

"And wipe out their army," Voreskae spoke up enthusiastically.

"Prepare the men," Corin ordered walking from the room.

"I wish to begin the offensive as soon as possible."

"Yes, sire."

* * * *

MARKO TRUDGED up to his rooms and meandered aimlessly before going into her room, to one of her wardrobes. He opened it and ran his hand over the silks. He caught a whiff of her scent, closed his eyes and tried to recapture it. She'd been everything to him and she was gone. So was he. He was soulless. "Jade," he moaned.

When he turned, he noticed a letter on the large fourposter bed. He moved forward, picked it up and glanced down at the signature. It was from Mehr. Marko glanced around, wondering how it had gotten there. Who'd brought it in?

Dear cousin,

I know what you have been told. It is a lie. Just as you were tricked into signing Jade's death warrant, so I have been the object of trickery and deceit. I know who is responsible, but I hold little hope of convincing you. No matter what

evidence they produce, I never betrayed you. I never did, I never would. I pray one day you will know it.

-Mehr

Marko wadded the parchment until it could be wadded no more. It no longer mattered what or whom he believed. The damage was done. All that was left for him was war. Not even victory or defeat mattered. Not death, not pain—only the act of warring and destruction appealed.

A roaring filled his ears and it took a moment to understand it was not his own rage, but a force outside of him. The floor underneath him shook. The walls shook. The window began cracking in an intricate looking design before it exploded, shattering glass everywhere. He brought his hands up on instinct, but felt the burning impact of slivers of glass as they embedded themselves in his face and hands. Screams of terror were heard over and around the nerve-shattering rumble. Then it stopped and, in the calm, he heard himself breathing.

* * * *

THE MULE BRAYED and pulled away from Lott's grasp. "Hey," he objected, reaching back for it. But the animal was backing, moving its head from side to side. Ammey bent and grabbed hold around the animal's neck and barely managed to hold on as the mule began kicking its hind legs. All the men had turned toward it, wondering what had gotten into the beast and how to calm it. Garid searched the ground for sight of a snake, thinking perhaps it had been bitten, then a rumbling began and the ground began to shake. Fin ran at

the mule, pulled Ammey off and carried her away from the crazed animal.

The noise intensified and became deafening. Ammey saw Jansen yelling, but his voice was utterly lost. Fin felt his balance slipping and set Ammey down, but kept a grip on her. They looked around, trying to understand what was happening, and saw the others running toward them. Lott stumbled, fell, and crawled until he could get to his feet again. A crack had appeared in the dry ground and was quickly spreading and widening. Some great force was splitting the earth open.

Fin wrapped an arm around Ammey and they hobbled awkwardly, due to her ankle. Glancing behind them, she noticed the crack moving toward them at an astonishing rate. She was slowing Fin and the earth was threatening to open up and swallow them. "Go," she cried. "Go on without me!"

"No!" He bent and forced her over his shoulder and began carrying her, and she was reminded of Vincent and Wydenyl. The world had gone mad in these last months and now it was ending. The crack came at them; it was only marginally behind's Fin's last step. It was after her, she thought in a panic. The earth wanted to swallow her. She was not supposed to have survived the desert of Uerad.

The others, having covered more distance, turned back and watched in horror as the gap in the ground grew deeper and wider. Fin was barely ahead of it and he was slowing. Peter John and Garid both ran back to help. Samuel also started forward but lost his balance and toppled to the

ground. He grabbed a breath and held it, certain he was about to see his friends lost in a chasm.

Garid's hand was extended, he was about to reach Fin and Ammey, but it was too late; Fin was lurching backwards. The earth beneath his feet had disappeared. Fin released Ammey and felt her slip downwards into his arms, even as time itself stopped and the two of them fell. He held her tightly and watched the earth come up around them. Hitting the ground was somehow a surprise. The impact knocked the wind from him and he blinked up at the faces of Peter John and Garid who were hanging over the side, reaching for them. As suddenly as the quaking had begun, it stopped, and the quiet that followed seemed as bizarre.

Peter John jumped into the divide, picked up Ammey and hoisted her up for Garid to pull out. Fin couldn't move any more than he could breathe so Peter John pulled and lifted him over a massive shoulder. "It's alright, now," he grunted as he straightened up and allowed the others to pull Fin free of the gulch. He, too, clamored out from the divide, fearful of it closing again. The group fell together, laughing despite being close to tears, each reaching for one another, badly shaken but thankful to be alive and in one piece.

"Even the donkey's alright," Darius exclaimed.

Fin managed to begin breathing, but was dizzy from exertion and the fall. Ammey looked at him, too overwhelmed for words, and he reached out and pulled her close again.

"So which of you idiots pissed off the gods?" Peter John bellowed.

"Will you look at that?" Samuel said, gawking at the destruction. Fully grown trees had been uprooted and there was a wide gash in the earth for as far as they could see.

"Are you alright?" Garid asked Fin, clapping his back.

Fin nodded. "Yes." He looked down at Ammey. She'd withdrawn from his embrace and she was avoiding his gaze, but she still remained close. Did she finally understand the strength of his feelings for her? He glanced over the group and shook his head, amazed it was over and that they had survived. "We all are."

CHAPTER 9: Gathering at Stonewater Forge

AMMEY FELT the thrill of recognition at every hill, tree and steam they came across in the southern valley, but she had no idea how it lit her face. Her vigor had improved greatly, so much so it was difficult to continue riding, but she had agreed to stay off her ankle as much as possible until she saw her home. The swelling was mostly gone and it no longer caused her pain to walk on.

Each of the men silently observed her, noting her reactions. She was not fearful of the reception she would receive nor she was varying from her claim of being Ammey McKeaf. To Samuel's way of thinking, there were only two possibilities. Either she truly was Ammey McKeaf or she was completely mad. She certainly did not strike him as being mad.

Fin had grown quiet and morose. He had hoped she would trust and accept him by now. All his life, women had sought him out and lavished attention on him. He'd never felt as special as what they told him he was, but he did know there wasn't an unmarried woman in Keved that he couldn't have, if he had so wished. But this woman, who claimed to be daughter of the McKeaf, she remained aloof from him.

"As we top this hill," she said, "—you'll see a wide creek and a stone wall that runs all the way to my home."

Fin felt a tightening in his stomach. He hoped there was nothing of the kind.

The group crested the hill and stopped, astonished by the sight before them. The grounds were littered with the remnants of old campfires and personal effects, but eerily devoid of people.

"What has happened here, do you think?" Darius asked to no one in particular.

Garid looked over and saw Ammey's chin trembling. She had been right about the creek and the wall. Either she'd passed this way before or she was who she claimed to be. Why was he still having so much difficulty accepting the notion? "Let's go find out," he said quietly.

Nothing had ever felt so strange to Ammey as riding up to her house and not recognizing the handful of men who were standing guard. The heart of her home was missing. Her family was missing.

"Do you know them?" Peter John asked quietly.

"No," she replied in a flat voice.

"Hello," Garid called to one of the guards.

Two of them started toward them, their hands on the hilt of their swords. "Who goes there?" one called.

"We're from the village of Keved," Garid returned. "We were told to come."

The guards relaxed their posture and continued toward them. They met and looked over the group, lingering the longest on the woman among them. "From Keved, you say?"

"Yes. I'm Garid Lourd. These are my kinsmen. What's happened here?"

"Corin attacked the camp outside Shilbridge."

Peter John looked up at Ammey and saw the color drain from her face. He reached up to either steady her or ease her from the mule in case she fainted.

"When?" Fin asked sharply.

"We learned of it seven days ago."

"We should go," Garid said.

"We're directing everyone there," the guard said. "They need reinforcements."

"Can you tell us where they are?"

"I can show you on a map," he offered, motioning for Garid to follow. The other guard also followed as did Fin and Darius.

"Are you alright?" Peter John asked.

Ammey slid off the back of the mule. "All the time we were coming here," she murmured, her eyes unfocused.

He nodded, understanding her point. "They were going the opposite way. Had we known, we could have intercepted them."

She shook her head and tried to clear her mind. There was no sense thinking about what might have been. They needed to move out and quickly. Horses—they needed horses. "Follow me," she said. She led the way perpendicular to the hall, slowly drawing closer. "I'm going inside to change clothes," she said in a low voice. "Circle around the hall and get to the stables. If there are any horses left, we'll take them. If not, we'll have to get them. We'll go to Thender. We have to have horses."

Peter John blinked in astonishment at the change that had come over her.

"Can you all ride?" she asked.

"They won't just let us ride from here," Lott argued.

"One thing at a time," she replied. She glanced behind her to make sure no was watching then dashed for one of the side entrances to the hall. If necessary, she would take the time prove who she was to the guards. However, if it wasn't necessary, it wasn't worth the investment of time and strength. Not when they needed to be getting to her family.

Peter John and Lott exchanged a puzzled look and then watched as Ammey made her way to the hall and disappeared, without being noticed. Fortunately, Garid, Fin and Darius were heavily involved in conversation with the guards over a map.

"What does she think she's doing?" Jansen hissed.

"Shut up," Samuel said, under his breath. "You'll draw attention to her."

"I guess we go around back and find the stables," Lott said quietly.

"We'll act like we're leaving," Peter John said.

Jansen was scowling, but he fell into step with the others.

* * * *

HER HOME had never felt so empty and hollow. Or was it she, herself, that felt empty and hollow? Ammey crept up the stairs, down the hall and into her room. Nothing had changed in here, so why did everything feel so utterly altered?

Marko's army had attacked her people, her family. It was almost inconceivable. The army that had been drilling and having contests to keep busy because Marko had recalled

them in a quest for permanent and lasting peace had attacked her people. What had happened?

She'd left; that's what had happened, and it had changed him. Was it true, or was she being vain and self important to think it? How much of what had happened was her fault? Would Marko have attacked had he known who she was? No. And therein lay her guilt. She undressed and pulled on new clothes as quickly as she could. She had to get to her family. She had to get to Marko.

* * * *

FIN'S JAW WENT SLACK at the sight of Ammey as she strode into the stables and looked over the few horses that were left. She was wearing a man's leggings, tunic, a different coat and an impressive sword. Her hair had been brushed and pulled back. She looked different, confident, especially as she mounted the horse they'd readied for her. She looked as if she belonged here. "Let's go," she urged.

* * * *

THE MCKEAF WALKED through one of the tents that housed the wounded. Corin's army had wiped out two divisions of his men and wounded a great many more. Reinforcements from the Forge had driven the enemy back from Nawllah, but the damage was great and momentum was working against them.

Two of his own sons had been wounded. Dane's broken arm was not life threatening, but Richard's head injury was. Lucas stopped at his son's bedside and took Richard's cool,

lifeless hand in his own. No man was supposed to outlive his child.

"General," someone said behind him. "Rehan Isolde has returned. He's asked for you."

Lucas acknowledged that he'd heard and, reluctantly, set down Richard's hand. Isolde had approached Corin in hopes of negotiating a truce, and he needed to learn the outcome.

* * * *

A DOZEN MEN were waiting on the General in Isolde's lavish tent, including the McKeaf's eldest sons. Anthony had suffered a blow that had blackened both of his eyes and David has sustained a deep cut on one side of his face, which was a swollen, angry looking red.

The wounds inflicted on his sons hurt Lucas more than any he had ever personally suffered. It hurt doubly because he should have been able to prevent it.

"Corin has given us three days to surrender," Isolde announced when the McKeaf entered.

"We can have more reinforcements here in ten days," Anthony spoke up.

"Not enough," Lucas replied grimly.

"His conditions are, we accept his rule," Isolde continued.

"We pay homage, taxes and, of course, owe him our loyalty."

Anthony barely restrained himself from lashing out. He would never pay homage to such a man!

Lucas McKeaf nodded and turned to go.

"General, wait," Rehan Isolde called. He had yet to get a reaction from the stoic man. "I need to know what you think our chances are."

Lucas did not wait. "I need to think," he replied as he continued out.

David and Anthony exchanged a look.

"I'll talk to him," David said quietly.

* * * *

THE CAMP BEGAN on the far side of Lere, further south than the map had shown, but it still took two days of hard riding to reach it. Thousands of tents were pitched as far as the eye could see and hundreds of horses were corralled at the rear. The smell of horse dung was strong as they approached. Ammey had led the way, but fell back as they drew close. She searched the guards for a familiar face, but did not see one.

"Dismount," a guard ordered. "You go no further."

"New arrivals camp in back," a man with a mop of greasy, black hair announced when the group had dismounted.

"Identify yourself," the first barked.

Ammey did not have to look directly at anyone to know she was receiving hostile glares. It was as if they already knew her culpability in the siege.

"I'm Garid Lourd of Keved, these are my kinsmen and this ... is Ammey McKeaf, daughter of the General."

Ammey was appreciative that he'd spoken her name as if he knew it for a fact.

"Oh, yeah? Well, ten lashes if you're not," a squinting guard threatened. "You should have been told that." He was young, perhaps eighteen, and had a face full of white, blister-like blemishes that were exceedingly unpleasant to look upon.

"I was told," she replied. "Where is my father?"

"I don't know," he came back at her. "Who's your father?" Several guards snickered. Additional men were gravitating toward the new arrivals, some curious, some anticipating trouble. Lott shifted his weight from foot to foot. If she couldn't prove who she was, these men would whip her, and there would be nothing they could do to stop it.

"She's ready," a voice called from a short distance away.

"You want to see one whipped before you decide to make your claim?" the young guard asked. He forced his tongue against his cheek, making it bulge out.

"Huh-uh," the mop-headed guard rejoined. "Too late. She already claimed it. We're going to have two whippings in a row."

"You'll whip her over my dead body," Fin seethed, taking a step forward.

"Perhaps, three," the blemish-faced guard threatened, glaring at Fin. "Anyone who speaks for her gets it, too."

"I speak for her," Garid said slowly and distinctly.

"We all speak for her," Peter John declared angrily, "—you scurvy, little son of a whore!"

Garid raised a hand as tempers escalated all around. "This is easily resolved. Get someone here who knows her."

"We don't do that," the guard replied hotly. His face had gone beet-red. "She answers questions. Questions only the real daughter of the McKeaf would know."

"Then ask," Lott snapped.

"I don't ask," he snapped back. "You'll speak to the man that does ... after we see the last girl who claimed to be Ammey McKeaf whipped."

"Take her weapon," the mop-headed guard said, nodding to her sword.

The group of men seemed poised to charge one another. It was madness. They did not need a fight here. Ammey quickly unsheathed her sword and handed it over, grateful that they had not noticed the dagger sheathed against her boot. "We have come a long way and we are not the enemy," she said.

"No. What you are is a waste of our time," mop-head snarled.

"Now, you may follow," the blemish-faced guard said arrogantly. He turned and stalked off and Ammey and the others followed.

Ammey searched the mass of faces looking for someone, anyone she recognized, but there was no one. Her gaze was met with either lecherous curiosity or blanket hostility; both made her feel ill. How had it come to this? And now they were to witness some young woman being whipped for claiming a falsehood? For the *crime* of claiming to be her? What kind of desperation led a person to claim to be someone else, especially given the penalty for lying? And how was this happening, anyway? Her father could not be aware of it because he never would have condoned it. So how was it

happening? Was he still in control? Was he alright? Her stomach knotted and she pressed a hand to it.

She caught sight of a girl strapped to a whipping post and came to an abrupt halt. The young woman had long, light brown hair, which was blowing in the light wind. A man with a whip in hand was waiting for the go-ahead, which the young guard with bad skin promptly gave. "No, stop," Ammey beseeched.

Too late. The man drew back his powerful arm, sending the whip through the air with a terrible sound that made her stomach clutch. The lash ripped skin open and the woman's pain-filled scream split the air. The man drew his arm back in a smooth motion to deliver another blow, but froze when he found a dagger at his throat.

"I said, stop," Ammey hissed.

Fin could not believe his eyes. Did Ammey not realize they were surrounded by no less than a hundred men? They would be crushed.

"Miss, that's a mistake," a stranger said as he stepped out from the crowd. "I don't care for the sentence myself, but—"

"Drop it," Ammey warned the man with the whip.

"You are fully surrounded by an army," the stranger continued in a calm, reasonable voice. He was obviously in command.

"By my father's army!" Ammey pushed the blade against the executioner's bare skin, cutting it slightly. A line of blood ran from it.

"Ammey," Garid warned softly. This was not a battle they could win.

"Tell him to drop the whip," she repeated stubbornly.

"They all have weapons," Garid said in a hoarse whisper, desperately afraid for her safety.

"Agreed," the commander suddenly replied. "Agreed. Drop the whip."

The man lowered his hand and dropped the whip, but continued to glare at her. He wanted nothing more than to get his hands and his whip on her. He wouldn't be stopping with ten lashes, either.

Ammey took a step back, lowered her dagger, and looked at the man in charge. "Get her down," she ordered. He was looking at her strangely, his gray eyes dancing over her face. Was it because she was shaking? He seemed slightly familiar, but she could not place him.

"Get her down," he ordered.

"Then that should be twenty stripes for her," the young guard said behind her. "Plus more for pulling a dag—"

"Stop talking," the commander snapped.

Garid did not know what to make of this new development. Did the man in charge believe her claim or was he planning to turn on her?

"I am Jan Meade," the commander said to Ammey. "We met once."

He did seem familiar. "The day of the meeting," she said as it dawned on her.

"Yes. Your brother introduced us."

"Is he here? Do you know if they're all here? Is my father alright?"

A clamor erupted as men began talking amongst themselves. Garid felt a tremendous weight lifted off him, despite the questioning he heard all around them.

"Is it her?"

"That's Ammey McKeaf?"

"How does Meade know her?"

Jan made his way to her. "I'll take you. They're in the inner camp."

Ammey sheathed her dagger with a trembling hand. She felt weak and shaky now that the confrontation was over. "Thank you," she managed weakly.

"Thuh—they can't go," the young guard gestured wildly to the men. "New arrivals go in back."

"They showed up with the daughter of the McKeaf," Jan said wryly. "I'm quite certain they'll be welcome at the front."

"And she'll take her sword back now," Samuel spoke up sharply.

It was handed back by the still-snarling mop-headed guard, although he refused to meet her eye. She sheathed it and fell into step beside Jan Meade. The others were a step behind.

"Can you tell us what's happened?" Garid asked.

"Corin's army came from three sides and took the camp outside Shilbridge by surprise."

Ammey felt as if a great fist had been driven into her chest.

"A great toll was taken before we could get reinforcements here," Jan continued.

"How great a toll?" Peter John asked.

"We lost nearly two thousand men," Jan replied.

"Is my father well?" Ammey asked.

"He was not hurt," Jan replied evasively.

Ammey's heart hammered, sensing bad news. "Who was?" He hesitated, not confident it was his place to tell her. "Richard."

Her legs turned wooden and she stopped. Jan Meade did the same, turning back to her. "Is he alive?" she asked in a small voice.

Jan looked grim. "The last I heard," he replied apologetically.

It took a moment to rediscover her powers of speech. "Is ... he expected to live?" she pushed.

Jan looked away, then looked back at her and shook his head. "I am sorry."

Ammey could not draw breath. *He cannot die. He cannot!* It's my fault.

"Ammey?" Garid asked. She did not look well.

She drew a shaky breath. "I need to see him," she said to Jan. "Please. Take me there first."

Jan nodded and began walking again.

"I'm sorry, Ammey," Lott said softly.

She felt Peter John reach out and brace her shoulder, a show of compassion and sympathy.

Garid was tempted to take Ammey's arm to support her, but something stopped him. His instict told him she needed to appear strong. And, after all, she'd earned the right after journeying such long distances. "Where do things stand now?" he asked Jan Meade.

"We've been ordered to surrender," Meade replied. "We have a day left to comply."

"Or?" Jansen asked, his heart suddenly in his throat.

Jan nodded. "Exactly. Or."

The men exchanged looks. Their timing had either been perfect or perfectly disasterous.

The group followed Jan Meade through one of the makeshift infirmaries, slightly sickened by the smell and astonished by the number of wounded men, some lying on cots, but most on furs or crude bedrolls. Clothing was still stained with blood, heads were bandaged, faces bruised and grotesquely swollen. There were piles of blackened, sawed-off limbs—feet, arms and legs.

"Whoa," Samuel said softly, not certain he could continue.

Jan stopped when he caught sight of the McKeaf himself sitting by Richard's bedside. He looked over and watched Ammey.

She stepped forward, almost shyly. "Baba?"

Lucas McKeaf jerked his head toward his daughter, his mouth open. She went to him, arriving just as he made it to his feet. He wrapped his powerful arms around her, lifting her off the ground. "You're alive," he breathed into her hair.

Garid couldn't tear his eyes away from the reunion, nor could he stop reliving the many times he'd challenged and doubted her. He had begun to believe her as of late, but still, this proof was breathstealing.

Fin, on the other hand, felt overwhelmed by the finality of the situation. There was no longer any doubt that she was,

indeed, Ammey McKeaf. She did not need him. She would never need him. She would never be his wife.

Lucas McKeaf set his daughter back down and pulled back to cup her face in his hands. "Ammey, Ammey. Where have you been?"

She smiled through her tears. "I've been trying to get home."

"Oh, Ammey," he breathed again. "We feared—"

"I know," she whispered. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry."

"You're so thin," he remarked, as he pulled back to arms length and looked her over.

"I'm fine," she assured him.

She looked at Richard and alarm and grief shot through her.

"Perhaps if he hears your voice," Lucas said quietly.

She looked longingly at her father and then sat and took hold of Richard's hand.

Lucas looked up and locked eyes with Jan Meade. "Gather my sons in my tent? And Ciro and Amador Ayala, as well."

Jan nodded and hurried off.

"The rest of my brothers are well?" Ammey asked, still looking at Richard.

"Well enough," he said sadly.

His tone made her look up at him, and she further noticed how uncomfortable her group of companions looked. She had ignored her responsibility. She sniffed and wiped her face. "Father, these are my friends from the village of Keved. I think I would not have made it without them."

Lucas moved forward to take Garid's hands. "Lucas McKeaf," he introduced.

"Garid Lourd. It's an honor."

"I thank you for your assistance," Lucas said. He went to the next man, offering his hands.

"Peter John Graves. It's a great honor to meet you, General."

Ammey looked at Fin. He'd been watching her, but he quickly averted his gaze. She'd hurt him. She hadn't meant to, but she had. She turned away and leaned forward to talk softly to her brother as the introductions among men continued. She reached out and smoothed his dark hair back. "Richard, it's me," she whispered. "There's so much I want to tell you. Please, please wake."

* * * *

JAN MEADE WENT to Anthony's tent first. As usual, he had his head together with some of his men, discussing potential strategy. Jan cleared his throat to get their attention. When he had it, he delivered the message. "Your father requests that you go to his tent at once."

"Why?" Anthony demanded irritably.

"Your sister has returned. She's here."

Anthony blinked. "Ammey?"

Jan nodded. "She's with Richard and your father."

Anthony stalked from the tent and hurried toward the infirmary. Jan watched him go then turned to go locate the other McKeafs. No one could tell Anthony what to do. He was

a man of strong passion and strong conviction and he acted on those things regardless of instructions.

* * * *

ANTHONY WALKED THROUGH THE TENT, seeing only her. Ammey sensed his presence and looked up to see him approaching. Just as her father had done, she got to her feet just as he reached her. He took hold of her arms and looked into her eyes. "Where have you been?" he demanded in a harsh whisper.

Samuel realized he was holding his breath. The McKeafs were not only champions and war chiefs; they exuded a life force that you could feel. It's as if they had so much power and strength, it flowed from them, touching everyone and everything around them.

"Anthony," Lucas McKeaf said.

"We've searched everywhere," Anthony continued, ignoring his father.

Lucas walked up behind him. "See that these men are settled and fed," he ordered. "We'll wait for you in my tent before your sister explains."

A sad smile crossed Ammey's face and Anthony pulled her to him in a crushing embrace. "Are you alright?" he asked. "Have you been hurt?"

"I'm alright," she assured him. "I am."

He pulled back and turned to see what men his father had referred to.

"These are my friends from Keved," Ammey explained.
"They were on their way to the Forge when they found me."

Anthony looked back at her, kissed her forehead and released her. Ammey still felt the imprint of his hands on her arms where he'd grabbed and held her.

"I thank you for helping my sister," he said, addressing all of them.

"It's as she said," Garid replied. "She's our friend. No thanks are necessary."

Anthony nodded. "Come with me." He led the way out of the tent and through the inner camp. It was far cleaner and more organized than the outer camp. "When did you come across my sister?"

"It's been a matter of weeks," Garid replied.

"Where?"

"She was making her way south."

Anthony stopped and waved one of his men over. "Find these men a tent and some food," he ordered.

"Yes, sir."

Anthony turned back to the men of Keved, looking them each over individually. "Was she alone?"

"Yes," Fin replied.

"Where had she been?"

"She has a quite a story," Garid said hesitantly. "But she should be the one to tell it. We were able to confirm part of it in Daleog—"

"Daleog?" Anthony repeated, confused.

"And we believe it all," Peter John added passionately.
"Your sister has great courage and honor."

Anthony studied him a moment, then he nodded and strode toward his father's tent to learn the facts.

* * * *

THE GENERAL WALKED through camp with his daughter's arm linked through his. He felt stronger with her back. Richard would come back to him, too; he suddenly felt it.

Men stopped and watched, then broke into animated conversation after they'd passed.

Lucas led the way to his tent and lifted the flap for her. "I'll be in shortly," he said gently.

Ammey nodded and stepped into the tent, immediately spying her youngest brother, who was taller than she was now. "Nicolas!"

He came to her almost shyly and they embraced.

"You're supposed to be my little brother."

"Father still won't let me fight," he complained.

"Do not be in a rush for that."

"I'm in less in a hurry now," he admitted quietly.

Outside the tent, Lucas McKeaf motioned one of his men over and ordered chairs to be brought and hot mulled wine to be served.

* * * *

THE TENT FLAP RUSTLED and Ammey turned to see Tom standing there.

"So, it's true," he said.

She was surprised how wonderful it was to see her least favorite brother. She loved him, despite a childhood spent bickering.

He walked to her and enfolded her in his arms. "Oh, Ammey." He rocked her back and forth.

Dane entered the tent next. He smiled and shook his head. "Never thought I'd see this," he teased.

Tom heard his brother's voice and reluctantly released his sister.

Ammey lingered a moment with her hand on Tom's chest, both his hands atop it. It had been a sweet and unexpected moment, one that she would treasure for the rest of her life. It had not been the reaction she had expected from him.

Dane walked forward and they embraced carefully. His arm was braced with wooden splints and bound in a sling. "Little sister," Dane said, pressing his forehead to hers.

Nicolas was struck by the resemblance between his brothers and Ammey. And there was something else, too—an unseen connection between them that made him feel left out.

"Are you well?" Dane asked.

"I am," she whispered. "Are you?"

"I am. My arm will heal. Did you see Richard?" She nodded.

Tom draped an arm around her and squeezed her thin shoulder. "I know he'll wake."

Men came in transporting chairs, wine and mugs. Lucas McKeaf followed them, watching the interaction between his children with a flush of warmth. Ammey's absence had been painful for all of them.

Anthony stepped inside the tent and saw all present who needed to be except for David. "Where's David?"

"They're looking," his father said. He ladled out a mug of hot mulled wine and brought it to his daughter. "Are you hungry?"

"I'll eat later," she said, accepting the mug gratefully. She had been desperately hungry before the excitement, but now her stomach was in knots.

Lucas couldn't look at her hard enough. He'd never accepted that she was dead, but he had not expected her to show up as she had either. It seemed almost too good to be true, especially after all the death and loss they'd suffered in the last days. Of course, he would have to have her escorted back to the Forge first thing in the morning. Nicolas would go, as well.

"Here, father," his youngest son said, offering him a filled mug.

Ciro and Amador Ayala burst into the tent. "She is here," Ciro exclaimed, holding out his hands. "It's true!"

Ammey quickly passed her mug to Tom. She knew her uncles. As expected, Amador ran forward swept her off her feet. "You've worried us nearly to madness, girl!"

"Set her down," Lucas insisted. She was not to be manhandled when she was so frail.

Amador set her down and kissed both her cheeks. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

"Tell us everything," Ciro urged.

Tom handed her mug back. "We're waiting for David," he informed his boisterous uncles.

"Have some wine," Lucas said.

"Of course we will," Amador exclaimed. "It's a celebration!"

* * * *

A DOZEN MEN were holding a discussion in Rehan Isolde's tent, including David McKeaf and Alexander Kievnall. Jan Meade entered and worked his way around to David.

"Of course, we fight on," David was saying. "The only question is whether we attack or wait for them to attack."

"I wish I could see some diplomatic solution," Rehan mused. "But Corin has the upper hand."

"David," Jan said.

David turned to him.

"Your sister—"

Alexander jerked his head so suddenly, Jan turned to him. He'd completely forgotten the talk of their courtship. "She has returned."

"Returned?" Alexander burst.

"Ammey?" David clarified.

Jan nodded, "Yes."

"She's here?" David asked. "Or at home?"

"Here, in your father's tent. They're waiting for you."

David exchanged an incredulous look with Alexander and they hurried away. Rehan Isolde, having overheard, followed as well. Jan followed after Isolde. If Isolde could be present, perhaps he could, as well.

* * * *

DAVID STEPPED through the tent flap and saw her. He strode forward and grabbed her up in a ferocious embrace, just as she'd known he would.

"Good," Anthony said. "We can finally get to it." He looked at his father, impatient for some fire and action. "There are still important decisions to be made."

Lucas glanced first at Alexander Kievnall, who was gawking at Ammey, oblivious to everyone else, then to Rehan Isolde, who was taking stock of everyone in the room, and finally at Jan Meade, who was nervously awaiting the decision whether he could go or stay, before turning forward again.

Jan felt the reprieve and breathed a little easier.

David finally released his sister. "Your face," Ammey said sadly.

"I've had it for years," he jested. "And yours," he said, stroking her cheek with a feather-light touch. "I've missed it."

"Welcome back," Alexander said, having walked forward.

David stepped back, allowing his friend a moment.

"Alexander—"

He bent and kissed her hand. How utterly strange that she'd considered marrying him—that she might have married him, had none of what occurred, occurred. He was a face of her past, a reminder that nothing could ever go back to the way it was. Seeing him made her heart ache.

"It's good to see you," he said.

Her throat ached. She nodded and gave him a weak smile. Surely, he did not harbor hopes of a life with her still.

"May we get started?" Anthony barked.

"Yes," Amador seconded. "Tell us everything."

Alexander reluctantly stepped back.

"Here," Lucas said to his daughter, placing a comforting hand on her back. "Sit."

She did, only then realizing she was terribly short of breath, and just when she most needed it. She hated what she had she do. Nicolas handed her a newly filled mug of hot wine and she accepted it gratefully. "Thank you, Nicolas."

"What happened after you left?" her father asked as he took the seat next to hers.

"We rode to Wydenyl," she began. "—but something felt wrong as we approached. We heard a scream, and Zenon insisted I get down and wait for them as they made certain it was safe." She swallowed. "Zenon and Cael were attacked and killed even before they made it inside the village."

Tom ducked his head. He'd known it was the case, that it had to be, but all that had been left of the victims of the massacre were gooey skeletal structures and shredded clothing. Some wild, carnivorous beasts had gotten to them and devoured the bodies, so they'd never been certain.

"Attacked by a wolf pack?" Ciro asked.

She nodded. "I was dragged backwards into a bush, a hand clamped over my mouth so I wouldn't make a noise. I didn't understand what was happening."

"Who was it?" Anthony asked. He was standing with his legs slightly apart, his arms folded, a scowl of concentration on his face. He looked particularly foreboding with his bruised face.

"One of Forzenay's Five," she replied.

"You were with the Five?" her father asked.

Rehan Isolde felt the shiver of a thrill.

"Yes. For a while," she clarified. "We went into Vihlae forest to meet with the council of Elpis." To her surprise, her

father sighed, as if greatly relieved, and no one challenged what she said. "Forzenay insisted I go. He said the seidhkona would know what we should do and whether it was safe for me to return home."

Nicolas was lost. He looked around and saw confusion on a few other faces as well, especially Alexander's.

"Do you know Milainah?" Ammey asked her father.

"I know of her." He could feel himself relaxing, finally understanding that she'd been with the seidh. Of course. Why had he never once thought of the possibility?

Ammey sipped her wine.

"So you've been with the seidh," Lucas confirmed.

She blinked, realizing that had been the reason for her father's relieved sigh. "N-no," she replied, shaking her head. "I was told to help Forzenay and the others in Draven."

"You went to Draven, instead of returning home?" Anthony demanded. "Why?"

She looked at him. "The men who'd planned the massacre of Wydenyl were there. They'd planned many massacres. And—" There was no good way to say it. "—we killed them," she said, looking down at the mug she held. She took another drink of wine to hopefully bolster her courage.

One of Rehan Isolde's aids appeared at the door with a chair and Rehan motioned him in. There were few comforts in the General's tent. There was a cot for sleeping, a hearth with a fire burning in the center and one table that doubled as the General's desk.

"We?" David asked, frowning. He moved to a chair, sat and leaned forward, as if to draw her out. "You're saying you had something to do with it?"

She nodded slowly.

"You helped execute men?" Tom repeated.

"Yes."

"Who?" her father barked.

She jumped slightly. "Tariq, Gilley, the men who attacked Wydenyl and ... another man." She shook her head, not recalling the other name. Her face felt warm.

"What was your part?" Anthony asked.

"I was to poison Tariq's wine. Then, later—"

"You said you were to," Anthony interrupted. "Did you?"

"Yes, but he wasn't drinking quickly enough." She paused. "In the end, Vincent killed him."

"Vincent?" Dane asked.

"One of the Five," she replied.

"Ammey," Rehan Isolde spoke up. "The Five are nearby. They are in Lere. They are my guests." If she was lying, he wanted her to know the trap she was working her way into.

Ammey's eyes misted over. "I heard they were in Shilbridge, trying to hold off annexation," she said quietly.

He blinked, aware that's exactly what they had been doing. "They were," he replied, surprised she was possibly telling the truth. "When Corin's army marched in, they left to help fight."

"Send for them," Lucas said.

Rehan nodded to his aide, who then scurried off.

She was going to see them again, she realized. She was going to see Vincent. Her heart began pumping harder.

"Continue, please," Amador urged in his loud, bass voice.

She tried to collect her thoughts. "One of the Five was hurt and I was told to bring him to his village, Daleog."

Anthony squinted at the mention of Daleog.

It was the same as with Garid and the others, Ammey realized. She was just going have to blurt out the truth as quickly as she possibly could. She took another drink, not aware how obvious her distress was.

"It's alright," Dane said consolingly. "Take your time."

"It would be easier to have out with it, I think," she explained.

"The men she came here with said they passed back through Daleog," Anthony announced. "They said the villagers confirmed what she'd told them."

"Go on," Lucas urged his daughter.

"Soldiers from Bellux-Abry rode into Daleog," Ammey began again, purposely avoiding meeting anyone's gaze.
"Many, including me, were taken captive and marched north.
But something went wrong. I was hurt—"

"How?" Tom asked.

She looked uncomfortable. "Ahh, one of the guards came for a little girl. I had to kill him."

David shook his head. She'd never hurt anyone in her entire life and now she was talking about executing men—professional soldiers, at that. "How?"

"My hands were bound. I got the rope around his neck and strangled him. But it was quickly discovered and—"

"And?" Anthony prodded when she faltered.

"I don't recall much of what happened next," she hedged. It was so silent, just when she didn't want it to be. "I was dragged."

There was a rush of exhaled breath.

"The next thing I remember is waking in a strange room," she continued, talking quickly. She desperately wanted to have the explanation over with. "I was in the palace. Later, I learned Marko Corin had come upon us and saved my life."

"Corin?" her father exclaimed. "You're certain it was Corin?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "I was his prisoner," she said slowly. "At first," she added hesitantly.

"What do you mean?" David asked. He was getting a strange, queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. "—at first?"

She drew a breath to speak, but couldn't form the words. She dreaded their reaction.

"Ammey?"

"A man by the name of Nafino Zephyr," she began.

"Corin's right hand man," Isolde spoke up. "Older man. He was also counsel to the elder Corin."

"He is evil," Ammey said vehemently. "You see, Marko's father was murdered when he was only twelve, and—"

"Marko?" Anthony repeated. His eyes narrowed. "You're on a first name basis with him now?"

She let out a shaky breath. "He thinks my name is Jade, but yes, we are."

"Jade?" Isolde exclaimed, coming straight out of his chair.
"Not as in ... the Lady Jade? His wife?"

Every face turned to her, shocked speechless. The silence in the room was painful.

"Yes," she replied in a strained voice.

"His wife?" Lucas repeated in a horrified voice.

She felt ill. They were all looking at her as if she'd betrayed them, as if she was Theresa. They didn't understand. "I ... I was hurt by Nafino Zephyr and w-when I woke, I pretended to have lost my memory. I knew I could not take any more torture, that I'm not strong enough," she stammered, talking as quickly as she could. "Corin saw my loss of memory as an ... opportunity. He claimed we were married."

The McKeaf bolted up out of his chair. He took a few steps, but there was no room, nowhere to go.

"But Lady Jade was murdered," Rehan Isolde uttered.

"No. I was abducted," Ammey explained. "But I got away from my captors in Uerad. In the desert," she added.

Anthony was shaking his head. "This isn't making any sense, Ammey," he said sternly. No one, but no one, escaped from the desert of Uerad.

She raised her chin. "Nevertheless, it is true," she stated. Every word out of her mouth had been challenged for too many weeks. It was exhausting and it was maddening.

"Ammey, when were you there?" Isolde asked. "In Bellux-Abry?"

"Late spring to early autumn."

"Early autumn. That's when the latest wave of aggression began," Isolde said. "Don't you see?" he said to the men

around him. "That's what began it all again, the shock of her murder."

Ammey saw what he was getting at. "If you tell him I'm here, he will not attack."

"No," the McKeaf yelled.

Everyone jumped slightly, startled by the uncharacteristic outburst.

Isolde sat again. "It would, at the very least, buy us time," he said, facing the General.

"My daughter will not be offered as a bargaining tool," Lucas seethed. "No matter what she has done."

The words cut through Ammey like a knife. *No matter what she has done.*

A young soldier came through the flap of the tent.
"General?" The McKeaf whirled around to him, his face as
dark as a thundercloud. He'd obviously interrupted something
of importance. "Your son woke briefly," the young man
reported quickly. "The surgeon said to get you."

Ammey tried to stand, but her knees were too weak.

The General nodded, excusing the messenger. He turned back to face the room, but avoided direct eye contact with anyone. "I need some time."

"We don't have time," Anthony replied sharply.

"I am the chief commander of this army," Lucas said directly to his eldest son. "I'll decide what he have and what we do." He turned his stony glare to David. "Find your sister some appropriate quarters." And, with that, he abruptly turned and walked from the tent, leaving a thick, uncomfortable quiet.

Ammey felt breathless and ill. Most of her family was avoiding looking at her. Alexander looked confused, as if he'd never seen her before. Only Rehan Isolde was looking directly at her, trying to understand her. She couldn't bear it. She got to her feet and walked from the tent, knowing David would follow, given the order he'd received. He did, and then took the lead. She felt empty and strange as she walked with him.

"Your hand is cold," he said.

How odd; he'd taken hold of her hand and she hadn't even realized it.

"You'll take my tent," he said. She did not reply and he looked over at her. She was so thin and pale. She was a ghost of her former self, floating along beside him. It was a terrible, painful fact that they had not been able to protect her from the monstrous Marko Corin and the wolves of Bellux-Abry. It was agonizing to accept.

* * * *

"ASK THE MEN from Keved to join us," Anthony said to Jan Meade. "We need to hear from them."

Jan hurried off. He heard Rehan Isolde talking as he went. He wanted to help, and it was his place, but he also wanted to hear all that was said. The revelations so far had been incredible, mind boggling.

"I understand your father's position," Isolde began. "—and his feelings. But we have to view this information objectively."

"She is our sister," Tom said evenly but with a definite ring of warning to his tone.

"I understand," Isolde returned. "But the lives of thousands may depend on it."

Anthony nodded, agreeing despite his feelings.

"I'm going to go see about Richard," Dane said.

Alexander Kievnall sank into a chair, stunned by the revelation that Ammey had been Marko Corin's wife. Why was no one questioning that? He could tell she was changed, but *Corin's wife*?

* * * *

DANE WALKED outside the tent and breathed deeply, trying to collect his wits. Ammey had changed. At first, he'd thought it merely her appearance, the result of having been ill or perhaps injured. But that was the least of it. Her innocence was gone; it had been stolen from her. In place of the girl was a woman of incredible strength, born of complexity and pain—a woman he no longer knew as he known his sister before. They had failed her. They had failed her so much more than they had realized.

* * * *

Richard's eyes fluttered. He opened them with what looked like a great deal of effort. Lucas exhaled forcefully; he was so

[&]quot;RICHARD?" Lucas McKeaf called to his son.

[&]quot;He woke for a short time," the surgeon said behind him.
"He knew his sister had been here."

[&]quot;What did he say?" the General asked.

[&]quot;He called her name."

[&]quot;Richard," Lucas called. "Wake up, son."

relieved and grateful. Richard's mouth moved and Lucas leaned closer to make out the words. He could not make out a single word. "Did you hear your sister?" he asked. He stroked Richard's face. "Ammey is here. She's here."

Richard smiled weakly and his eyes closed again.

"It's a good sign," the McKeaf said, hoping for confirmation.

"It's a very good sign."

* * * *

HER JOYOUS WELCOME had lasted a short while and then she'd devastated her entire family. Ammey sat on her brother's furs, buried her head in her hands and cried. They had all looked at her as if she was a traitor. It is what she had feared and it is what they thought. She stretched out and sobbed, too fatigued and grief stricken to do anything else.

* * * *

LUCAS WALKED back to his tent slowly. He entered to find it crowded with the addition of the seven men from Keved and Forzenay's Five. Ammey was gone.

Forzenay walked to the General and they shook hands.

"I just learned she was with you," Lucas said.

Forzenay frowned at the message and the accusation in the General's tone. "I sent word of it months ago from Draven. Did you not get it?"

"No."

"That means the messengers were killed."

"Father," Anthony spoke. "We thought we should hear everything that's happened from other perspectives."

Lucas moved in to sit. He desperately needed to sit.

"Forzenay," Anthony said.

"We came across her first," Forzenay began, "—outside of Wydenyl."

* * * *

"MISS MCKEAF?" a young man called from outside the tent. "May I enter?"

"Yes," she replied after a moment.

"I was told to bring you some food," he explained as he carried a tray in. She was sitting cross-legged on the furs. It was evident she'd been crying, but she sat emotionless at the moment. He sat the tray in front of her.

"Thank you." She waited until he left to pick at the food. Her body was in need of food, yet she had no appetite. She was desperately tired, but her mind would not allow her to remain still or sleep. Their predicament was too real and too intense. They had less than a day to surrender or to make another move.

Her father had been hurt by her revelations, her entire family had. They still wanted to protect her, but she was long past such protection. It was possible that she was the key to negotiation, to a peace settlement, to a temporary truce—something. She had never disobeyed her father, but she could not allow him to do nothing when the mere mention of her might save lives.

She got to her feet and paced, but the action only made her feel more agitated. She was not a child any longer. There was no innocence left to protect in her. She was also no traitor. She'd done what she had to in order to survive. She was a warrior, as much as any man here. She'd suffered and fought. She'd earned the right to have a say in what happened, especially where she was concerned. She could not, would not, be sent to her room like a child.

She poured cold water in a basin and washed her face, hopefully ridding all evidence of the childish tears she'd shed. She steeled herself for what she had to do and then left the tent. She had to make them understand.

* * * *

DARIUS WAS DOING the recounting of events they'd learned from the villagers of Daleog because he had a talent for remembering explicit details. "Then Ammey fainted. Zephyr said the marking should be stopped until she woke, but Corin said for it to continue and that it should be made as small as possible."

Dane squinted as he listened. It was strange to hear Corin represented as cruel and then merciful. It was baffling. He'd saved her, hurt her, spared her, married her. And the confusion he was experiencing was from the safe distance of time and space. How had Ammey felt enduring it?

Darius continued. "Another man spoke up and asked about the prisoners. There was some argument about what would become of them, Zephyr saying they should go to the dungeon, the other man saying that Ammey—Jade, they

called her, had held up her end of the bargain. She had endured the torture, uh, the marking, in silence. Corin finally declared that they should be set free ... and they were."

Alexander Kievnall looked over at his best friend as David ducked his head and ran both hands through his hair, gripping its thickness at the base of his neck. It was a gesture of extreme emotion. David was aghast at the description of torture his sister had endured.

The room was quiet and the quiet was awkward. The events recounted had been difficult to take in fully. All present had learned of her part in Draven, both with Tariq and the later fight she'd engaged in to defend her friend's lives. They'd heard the account of her fight against the wolves of Bellux-Abry when Daleog was attacked, when she had killed no less than six men. They had learned how she had put her life on the line to protect a child, once the villagers had been captured. She had nearly died for it. She would have died, had Corin not shown up when he did. Then she'd endured an excruciating ordeal to free the villagers who were being kept as slaves.

"Ammey," Kidder exclaimed when he saw her enter the tent.

Lucas jerked his head up at his daughter. The events recounted had been painful to hear and yet they'd filled him with pride at her strength and courage.

Kidder rushed to her. "You're too thin," he remarked. He wrapped his arms around her in a brief, brotherly embrace. "Someone get her some food!"

Forzenay tapped Kidder's shoulder. "Move." Kidder acquiesced with a wink at Ammey and Forzenay kissed her cheeks. "It is good to see you," he breathed in her ear.

"And you," she returned in a whisper, having no power of actual speech at the moment.

Nicolas was fascinated as he watched his sister react to these legends he'd only heard of. He was not alone in his fascination, either. He could tell.

"Stripe," Ammey said, reaching for him.

He hugged her and patted her back. "So glad to see you."

Graybil pulled her close and kissed each of her cheeks.

"How can I ever thank you for what you did?"

Her eyes filled and she shook her head. "I love your wife and daughter."

Vincent could feel his heart pound as he watched and waited for her eyes to find his. When they did, he stopped breathing for a moment. She walked forward and there was a hesitation before he took her in his arms without a word. He stroked her hair, breathed in her scent and held her tightly.

Anthony's eyes narrowed in surprise. This was no embrace of friendship, as the others had been. He looked away, trying to accept all that he'd learned.

Alexander also had to look way. He'd never truly had any assurance that she'd be his wife, but he had hoped. Now those hopes were dashed, utterly dashed.

Lucas McKeaf breathed deeply, trying to collect himself. His little girl was no more. A woman had taken her place, a woman he didn't even know at the moment.

Vincent didn't want to let go of her, but everyone was watching, so he did, although he kept hold of her hand.

"Ammey," Rehan Isolde said. "We need to hear more about what happened with Marko Corin."

"You were the lady Jade we heard about?" Forzenay asked, touching her arm.

Vincent squeezed and then released her hand.

"I thought it might be you," Forzenay said, "—when we heard the name and the effect this Jade was having on Corin." He glanced at Vincent, knowing the realization was difficult to accept. Vincent had been stalwart in his refusal to believe it.

Ammey looked at her father. "Forzenay gave me the name," she explained. "In Draven."

"He told us," her father replied.

She blinked. She could not make out his feelings toward her. Did he hate her now? Did he hate what she'd done? What she'd become? The mood was as thick as the silence. She would never have willingly hurt him or any of them, but what was done was done, and they had to focus on the lives at risk. "That's why I came back," Ammey spoke. "I know we are nearly out of time."

"Just to clarify," Isolde said slowly. "You were Marko Corin's wife ... in all ways. Correct?"

She felt her face grow warm. Her brothers looked horribly uncomfortable and she could not bring herself to look at her father. "Yes."

She heard Vincent's exhale. It seemed she could do nothing but hurt people.

"And he had feelings for you?" Isolde asked as tenderly as possible.

"Yes."

"We must tell him she is here," he stated firmly.

Lucas frowned at him, but did not speak.

"As you said, if nothing else," Anthony said, "—it buys us time."

"He wanted peace," Ammey spoke up. "He was working toward it."

Vincent looked at the floor and bit his tongue. The words cut like a knife to his heart.

"That's true," Isolde said. "It did seem he was working toward peace."

"It's Nafino Zephyr and Salvo Voreskae that are behind the sieges," she continued.

Vincent felt his breath congeal. His chest suddenly felt heavy with the realization she cared about Marko Corin. She actually cared about him!

"If Corin thinks you're dead, we will need proof you are alive," Isolde said.

"Let me see your arm," Lucas said.

The command took her by surprise and silenced the room.

She turned to Vincent. "Will you cut my sleeve?" she asked softly.

He took out his dagger with a slightly shaking hand and slit, then ripped her sleeve, revealing the uruz symbol. An expression of pain crossed his features.

This was one of the moments she had most dreaded, and yet, now that it was here, it was almost a relief. She did not

want to keep hurting and disappointing everyone. It was better to be done with all the dreaded revelations. She walked to her father and her brothers came forward to see it, as well. She avoided looking at anyone but she heard the quiet exclamations, the gasps and the sighs.

"And your wrist," Dane said, noticing the scars from the rope.

Anthony, standing behind her, placed his hands on her shoulders. "We're proud of your courage," he said.

Her eyes filled and she nodded, unable to speak.

"Send the message," Lucas finally spoke. "It will buy time.

In the meantime, we figure out a way to attack and prevail."

Ammey felt an icy rush of cold fear shoot through her. "It's possible to negotiate peace," she pleaded, looking at her father.

Lucas looked at her steadily. "I want him dead."

Anthony stepped back. "I'll find someone to send a message."

"If we need proof, what can we offer?" Isolde asked.

"She has his mark," David spoke up.

It was all happening too fast and Ammey felt overwhelmed. She did not want Marko Corin killed. She didn't want it.

"But people know about that," Isolde rejoined. "Speaking of it is not proof. Remember, he was told she's dead. He believes it. Ammey, is there anything you know, any thing you can pass on as proof you are alive?"

"Think," Anthony urged, squeezing her shoulders.

"Something he told you in confidence—"

"I want the truce," she said weakly. "I want peace."
Rehan Isolde got to his feet. "We all want peace," he said.
"I, myself, have wanted a diplomatic solution all along. You
may be the key." He shook his head. "Corin did not feel the
need or desire to negociate before. But we need proof. Corin
will not believe you are alive without some kind of proof.
Obviously, we cannot provide you."

"Think," Anthony said again. "He must have shared something that you can pass on to convince him."

"There is something," she said quietly, dropping her eyes.
"Tell him I know why he hates the ugaria bush."

"That's it?" Isolde asked, frowning.

"It will be enough," she assured him.

"I will take the message," Alexander offered. "I've heard everything. I know what to pass on."

Lucas nodded, appreciating the gesture, especially in light of what Alexander had to be feeling.

"Wait," Isolde said, holding up a hand. He'd been trying to come up with questions Corin would ask—what he would challenge. "How were you abducted?" he asked Ammey.

"Two men came into my room, bound and gagged me. I saw the maids outside the room. They'd killed them."

Isolde nodded. These were good details. "Who was it? Did you know them?"

She shook her head. "They were brothers. They were hired to abduct and then kill me. They were going to cut off my head."

Lucas McKeaf balled his hands into fists. Nicolas shuddered, then experienced a moment of embarrassment for fear someone had seen him.

"Who hired them?" Anthony asked. "Were you told?"

"Nafino Zephyr," she replied, certain it was true despite the fact that they'd never actually said it.

"Good," Isolde said. "That's good, Ammey. It should be sufficient."

Alexander turned and left and David followed him outside for a word in private.

* * * *

FIN, STANDING IN BACK of the room, felt tremendously foolish. He'd actually had hopes of rescuing a woman who was loved by everyone she came into contact with. A king loved her, one of Forzenay's Five loved her. He could see it in the man's face, in the way he watched her every breath and move.

He cringed, realizing how idiotic he'd been to have hoped for a life with her. And yet he had come to care about her even before realizing how beautiful she was. That was becoming more apparent every day as she grew stronger. He'd begun falling in love with her before he believed she was the daughter of the McKeaf, before he realized she had the courage of a warrior. Not that it mattered. He would have loved her had she been weak and alone in the world. What a strange, cruel thing fate was to have put such an unobtainable jewel in their path.

"We should go," Garid said quietly.

Peter John nodded. He reached out and squeezed Fin's shoulder, understanding some of what he was feeling.

* * * *

"HOW DID YOU get away from the men in Uerad?" Forzenay asked.

She felt weak and exhausted. She hadn't eaten much for days and the evening had taken a toll on her. "I remembered some of what you taught me," she said wryly. "Perhaps we could talk more tomorrow," she said.

"Yes," her father said, not at all certain he was up to hearing any more details. "Tomorrow. You should rest."

She glanced at Vincent and then left, hoping he would follow.

Tom watched his sister leave, trailed by Vincent of the Five. Exhaling deeply, he leaned forward, elbows on knees, trying to accept and adjust to all that he'd learned.

* * * *

AMMEY AND VINCENT were nearly to David's tent before either of them spoke. "Do you love him?" Vincent finally asked.

How like him to be so pointed in his asking. "I grew to care about him," she replied slowly.

Vincent shook his head. This was not a development he had expected or prepared for. "But he hurt you."

She stopped and turned to him. "And I hated him, defied him. It was the reason he had me marked. It was punishment. I would have killed him, if I could have. But he

saved my life twice and he changed. I learned things about him. I discovered he's not a monster, that he's been manipulated all his life."

"He made love to you?" Vincent asked with a breathless intensity. "He claimed your virginity?"

She looked down, not at all certain she could continue the conversation.

"Ammey-"

"The night ... the first night," she said in a thick voice. "He asked me what I was so frightened of. Was it the pain or that I was promised to someone else?" She looked up at him. "I thought of you," she finished in a whisper.

He reached for her hands and brought them to his mouth, kissing one and then the other.

She felt a tear run down her face, and realized she was too fatigued for this discussion. "I cannot talk about it now," she whispered.

He pulled her close and wrapped his arms around her. "I wish I'd been able to protect you," he whispered in her ear. "I wish that more than anything."

She closed her eyes and breathed in his scent. "So do I."

* * * *

IT WAS MIDNIGHT before Alexander was surrounded by soldiers of Bellux-Abry and led to see Marko Corin. Corin's tent was even more elaborate as Rehan Isolde's. It was three times the size of any other tent and filled with luxury items and a table filled with food and wine. Corin was more

handsome and younger than he'd imagined—which made him hate the man all the more.

"You bring word?" Corin asked. He could not have sounded more disinterested.

Alexander was kept at distance from Corin, despite the fact his weapons had been taken. "I do." Several men and a woman, obviously a whore, were flocked around the king. "Although, I dare say, it's not the word you expect."

"Oh?"

"Your ... wife," Alexander's jaw nearly clenched. "She is alive and among our number."

Marko's expression grew incredulous then dark. He leaned forward slowly and drew himself upright, searching Alexander's face for some indication of what would possess a man to make such a claim. Did he realize how slowly it was possible to die?

Eskarne felt her breath catch. Corin had just allowed her to be near him again. The mere mention of Jade was going to be a setback. She glared at the man who'd uttered the hateful words, hoping he would suffer a slow and agonizing death.

Marko could not even form the words to have the man killed, the pronouncement had so shocked him.

"Jade," Alexander continued. The room was bristling with hostility and Corin was in the grip of a cold fury. Alexander realized if he were not careful, he would be struck dead before he convinced Corin of the truth.

"My wife was abducted and murdered," Corin replied slowly, enunciating each word precisely.

Alexander shook his head before replying. "She was taken into Uerad, where she managed to escape from her abductors," Alexander said.

"It's a lie," Eskarne cried. "Kill him!"

Hope was zinging through Marko, but it was tempered by the memory of a severed arm tattooed with his mark. Yet, how had this man known she'd been abducted and taken to Uerad? And why make a claim that could not be substantiated? "It's impossible," he challenged, trying to steel himself for disappointment. "Her arm—"

"Has your mark," Alexander said. "I saw it myself."

Soldiers were inching toward him, their blades already drawn.

Corin held out a hand to stop anyone from striking him dead. "I will say when and if he dies," he stated.

They withdrew, but kept their swords at the ready.

"As proof—" Alexander said slowly.

Corin's eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

"She said to tell you that she knows why you detest the ugaria bush."

Marko's eyes widened. His mouth opened and then closed without him uttering a sound. He turned his head sharply to address his guards. "Leave us!"

"But sire-"

"All but one of you. You," he pointed to a burly looking quard.

The soldiers exited looking displeased and hesitant.

"My lord," Eskarne said softly.

He turned a hate-filled glare on her. "Get out," he hissed.

She scowled at Alexander but left quickly.

Corin gestured a chair. "Sit."

Alexander moved forward stiffly and sat.

"I did not get your name," Corin said, also sitting.

"I am Alexander Kievnall."

"I have heard of you." There was a long pause before he asked, "Do you know my wife?"

Alexander didn't react for several moments. "Yes."

"Where is she from?"

"Stonewater Forge."

Distrust flashed in Marko's eyes.

"Not from Daleog," Alexander added. "—as you thought.

And her name is not Jade. It is Ammey. Ammey McKeaf."

Corin was stunned, too stunned to speak for several moments. "McKeaf?" he finally uttered.

"As in the General and his sons that you've been fighting. One lies near death, in fact."

Marko absorbed this chilling fact in silence. "I want to see her," he finally said.

"We'll agree to a truce, first," Alexander stated firmly.

"Done," Corin said at once.

Alexander blinked, surprised by the instant response. Of course, a quick acquiescence did not mean he was sincere. "Formally," he stipulated. "We can meet in a neutral location. "Nawllah or Lere."

"Lere," Corin said. "There is a castle on a hill above the Rhannalinx River. It's visible from both camps, I'm sure. We'll have the place cleared, then we each can post guards for security."

"How many?"

Corin shrugged. "Twenty. Is that sufficient?"

Alexander gave a brief nod. He had not expected to get into this level of detail.

How many representatives will you bring?" Corin asked.

Alexander thought about it. "A dozen."

"Agreed."

"When?" Alexander asked.

"Tomorrow. Noon."

Alexander nodded. "Agreed."

"Is she well?" Corin asked after a brief pause.

"She is thin."

"How did she get away?"

"You can ask her that yourself."

Marko bristled. He was not accustomed to cavalier responses. "Did she say who was responsible?" he asked stiffly.

"Yes. It was a man, an advisor of yours, named Nafino Zephyr."

Marko jerked. He shook his head, unable to accept it. Alexander did not speak.

"You are certain of the that information?" Corin asked slowly.

"I know only that she was certain."

Marko sat back deeply shaken by the realization that Zino had played him for a fool. "You may go," he said in a thick voice.

"To be perfectly clear," Alexander said, "—you give your word you will not attack on the morrow, but will instead meet to discuss a truce?"

"Yes. You have my word. We will meet at noon or shortly thereafter. And I will expect to see my wife."

Alexander stood. "Ammey McKeaf will be there."

Corin did not like his tone, nor did he understand if he'd implied something in the curt response. But he'd been badly shocked by the news of Zephyr's betrayal. It was possible he was not thinking clearly. "See him safely to the edge of camp," Corin ordered the guard.

* * * *

MARKO CORIN WAITED until he was alone before he released a long, shaky breath. She was alive. His wife, his Jade. No—"Ammey," he muttered. "Ammey McKeaf."

He got to his face and paced, filled with a ferocious, nervous energy he had not felt in months. It was as if he'd just been brought back to life. Zino! Zino had to be dealt with once and for all. Now, tonight. Marko suddenly thought of Mehr, of his warning that Zino would be his downfall. Mehr, who was likely as innocent as Nafino was guilty.

"Sire?"

Marko turned to see the guard returned.

"I saw the man to the edge of camp," the man reported.
"Is there anything else?"

Marko looked away, trying to recall the names of the men Mehr had put in charge of the army for a time. Tullmoore,

that was one of the names. "Do you know General Tullmoore?"

"I know of him, sire."

"Is he here?"

"I don't know."

"Find out. If he's here, send him to me at once. And tell him to bring his most trusted men."

* * * *

EVERYONE STOPPED SPEAKING when Alexander walked back into the McKeaf's tent.

"What did he say?" Isolde asked.

"He agreed to the truce," Alexander replied. "He was ... deeply shocked."

"Are we to meet?" Isolde asked.

Alexander nodded. "Tomorrow. Noon. There is a castle on the Rhannalinx. It will be cleared and then each side will secure the hall with twenty guards. We'll then meet to discuss a truce agreement, not more than a dozen representatives per side. He also stipulated that he wants to see ... his wife."

"Do not call her that," Anthony replied heatedly.

"It's how he thinks of her, Anthony. It's how he referred to her. Do you think it gives me any pleasure to call her that?"

"This is excellent," Isolde said enthusiastically. "Let's work on a peace settlement."

"If you will excuse me," Lucas requested. "I'll see it when it's completed." He was too tired to move or think any more. He was too tired to feel.

"Of course," Isolde said. "We'll work in my quarters."

* * * *

"ZEPHYR IS GONE, sire," Andre Smithe reported. "It looks like he cleared out without taking anything."

Someone had obviously told Zino of the visit from Alexander Kievnall and what he'd subsequently revealed.

Two more men entered the tent to report. "Voreskae is nowhere to be found, sire."

"Zephyr, as well," Smithe told them grimly.

"Who are our best trackers?" Corin asked.

"You want them tracked down and returned?" Tullmoore asked for clarification.

"Yes," Corin replied firmly. "They will be interrogated and then executed."

Tullmoore nodded. He was gratified to finally hear it. "It will be done."

"One last thing," Corin said. "Bring me Eskarne, if she can be found."

Tullmoore gestured to his men and they retreated to see the orders carried out.

* * * *

"MY LORD," Eskarne said. "You asked for me?"

Marko turned to her. "So you are still here. I thought you might have left with Zino and Voreskae."

She looked baffled. "My place is with you."

"Take off your clothes," Marko ordered.

She swallowed, nervous by his strange expression and tone. "Happily," she said weakly. She went about the task slowly, with trembling hands. "I live only to pleasure you."

"This will bring me some pleasure," he said dryly.

When she was naked, she came toward him.

"You went to Zino first, when you left here?" he asked.

She blinked. "N-no," she stammered.

"Do not lie to me!"

She stopped. "I ... only wanted to protect you," she pleaded.

"Protect me?"

"Yes."

"You went to Zino so that he could *protect* me?" She nodded frantically. "Yes."

"And you told him all of what you'd heard in here?"

"So that he would come to your aid!"

"And yet he did not come. He ran."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Do you not?" he asked softly. "Guard," he suddenly yelled.

Eskarne jumped, he'd so startled her.

Two guards burst into the tent, alarmed. "Sire?"

Marko looked at Eskarne with a cold hatred. "Take her away. I don't care where. I do not ever want to see her again. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sire."

She opened her mouth and her breath was released in a shaky torrent. "You cannot mean that," she begged.

The guards came forward. One took hold of her arm and pulled her backwards. Her dark eyes were wide and terrified, her mouth agape. She turned and tried to veer toward her clothes. "Let me dress," she commanded.

One of the guards looked to Corin for guidance.

Marko shook his head. "But take them," he said. "I wish no reminder of her to be left behind."

"Stop, please," she cried. "Marko!"

Corin turned his back on her as she was dragged out and squatted in front of the fire. He felt cold and could not warm, even with a fur draped around his shoulders. He felt the heat on his face, but it would not penetrate his being.

What kind of leader was he, when his every decision had been based on a lie? How could anyone trust his judgment? Yet, he was still in control of an army that possessed the strength to crush the force that opposed them. Could he back away now? If he did, would he still command his army's respect and allegiance? Or did he command it?

It was odd that Zino had been right about Jade's name. Marko pictured her face, imagined running his finger over the soft contours of her cheek. How would she react to him, given all that had happened? He stood and pulled the fur tighter around him. Was that the thought that so chilled him?

CHAPTER 10: The Lere Conference

"SO, WHOM do you love?" Julia wheedled softly.

Ammey opened her eyes again. She'd been nearly asleep, but Julia refused to stop talking. "I'm too tired," she complained sleepily. It was exceptionally late, or perhaps early, given the low amount of gray light in the room. "Go to sleep."

"But you have to decide," Julia kept on.

"Decide what?"

"What you'll do, of course."

Ammey turned on her side and studied her friend's profile. Julia was on her back, staring up the ceiling, the silk covers pulled up to neck. Julia looked over at her and then shifted to face her. "Vincent," she said sadly.

"Vincent," Ammey repeated softly.

"Or Marko?" Julia asked. "We never thought about loving more than one man. We didn't know it was possible, did we?" "No."

"Nothing is simple," Julia said wistfully.

The scent in the air was pleasing. It was the smell of wild loira wafting in the breeze. Ammey sighed, realizing how much she'd missed being here, being with her friend. "I've missed you," Ammey said.

Julia smiled. "I've missed you."

Ammey suddenly frowned, not understanding why they'd been separated. "Where is Saren?"

"Oh, he's here," Julia said. "Don't worry. You have quite enough to think about."

"What should I do?" Ammey asked.

"Do you love Marko or do you merely want to rescue him?"

The words took Ammey by surprise and she had to mull
the notion over.

"And Vincent?" Julia asked. "Do you love him?"

"Yes. But-"

"But what?"

"What if I love them both?"

"Ammey, you have to decide."

The room was filling with light. It was morning and they'd talked all night when they should have been sleeping. "What will I do?" Ammey asked, rolling onto her back.

She woke, her heart pumping hard. She could still smell wild loira. She sat straight up, sniffing to be certain. It was there, but fading. "Julia?" she whispered, still needing her.

She lay back down, but she was much too awake to fall to sleep again. Although it was early, just after daybreak, she had slept more for hours straight than she had in months. Besides, today was the day that would decide their fate—her fate. She got up and dressed, realizing that she did not know the outcome of Alexander's meeting with Marko.

* * * *

THE AIR WAS FREEZING outside the tent. It stung her face. She hugged her coat tighter and went to find someone she knew. Soldiers, standing their posts, nodded to her and

she nodded back. She did not have her bearings in this place.

All the tents looked alike.

"Ammey," David called.

She gladly turned to him.

"Good morning," he said when he reached her. "Come have some breakfast."

"What happened with Alexander?" she asked as she fell into step beside him.

"Corin agreed to a truce."

She exhaled, too relieved for words.

"We're to meet today at noon. He ... wants to see you."

She nodded. She'd known he would want to see her. It was no surprise. "David—"

"Yes?"

"Where is Saren?"

He was silent for a moment. "He-"

She stopped and looked at him, knowing the answer but horrified by it. "No," she whispered.

David nodded slowly. He watched as her green eyes filled. He took her arm again and led her on. "We've lost too many friends," he said quietly.

Ammey pressed a cold hand to the aching place in her throat. Lost too many friends. It was a vast understatement.

* * * *

"SIRE," a man whispered, waking Corin. "We found Voreskae."

Marko sat up and rubbed his face. It was morning. Early, by the look of it. "Alive?"

"Very much alive."

"What about Zephyr?"

"We're still looking."

"Where is Voreskae?"

"Just outside."

"Let me dress and collect myself, then you can bring him in."

* * * *

SALVO VORESKAE HAD NEVER LOOKED or felt so disheveled. Things had been well in hand, going perfectly according to plan and then everything had collapsed, and he could not fathom how. To be marched in front of Corin as if he was a common criminal was almost beyond enduring.

"You're going to die for your treachery," Corin said from his throne-like chair. "The only question left is how quickly and humanely it will be done."

"I have done nothing to deserve this," Voreskae exclaimed.

"I would like to hear your confession before you die," Corin said. "Only the crimes committed against me, if you please."

"Why should I?" Voreskae asked defiantly.

Corin flicked his eyes up at the soldier nearest Voreskae, who swung around and hit Voreskae in the face. The man cried out and doubled over, blood pouring from his nose.

"On your knees," Tullmoore barked, kicking one of his knees out from behind.

Voreskae collapsed on the floor, then rose to a kneeling position, no longer bothering to staunch the blood flow. He glared at Corin.

"Your crimes," Corin repeated. "And if you leave any out, any that Zephyr has already revealed—" Corin broke off. "Have you seen the device Zino designed to crush a man's testicles?"

Voreskae paled. He had not realized they had captured Zino. If Corin had allowed the torture of Nafino Zephyr, he stood no chance whatsoever of surviving this ordeal. His facial features began twitching. "None of it was my idea," he said breathlessly.

"That is not what I asked," Corin replied calmly. "And I am running out of patience."

"Alright," Voreskae said, holding his hands out.

"Starting with your most recent treachery and working your way backwards, I think," Corin said.

"Jade," Voreskae blurted. "We, Zino, that is, planned to have her abducted and murdered. Her ... severed head was to have come back."

Corin drew his hands in front of his face and pressed his fingers together to keep them from shaking. It was confirmation of the information he'd received, but he could not appear thrown by it. He worked to keep his face impassive. "But it did not," he said as calmly as he could.

"No, it did not."

"Go on."

"We realized we needed a substitute."

"So you had another woman marked, then cut off her arm," Corin said, figuring it out as he said it.

"Yes."

Marko lowered his hands. "And Mehr?"

Voreskae could not stop the look of sheer hatred that crossed his face. "I found the best forger in the city and had him pen a journal to appear written by Mehr's own hand."

The pride in Voreskae's voice made Marko feel ill. He did not trust his voice to speak.

"How did you get Xander Beck to confess?" Tullmoore asked after several moments of strained silence.

"The same as with Vhord," Voreskae replied. He huffed in surprise at the shocked look that came over Corin's face.
"Zino didn't tell you!"

Corin struggled to breathe.

A victorious smile lit Voreskae's face until a kick to his ribs sobered him.

"Keep talking," Tullmoore hissed.

"My father?" Corin said, no longer bothering to appear threatening.

"Was not a man we could control," Voreskae grunted. "Nor were we confident William could be controlled."

Marko grabbed the sides of his chair and squeezed. He felt himself begin to shake. "You killed my father and brother?"

"An assassin killed your father. A man by the name of Jonah Long."

"And Vhord?" one of the men spoke up.

Voreskae shrugged. "Had a family he cared for. He could not abide seeing them tortured to death."

"And it was the same with Beck?" Tullmoore asked.

Voreskae could see the horror on all their faces.

Weaklings! They didn't have the stomachs to hear about it, much less to come up with and carry out such a bold plan. It

took men of vision, strength and resolve. Men like him. Men like Zino. Bellux-Abry would never prevail without them to lead the effort. They were digging their own graves. "Yes, it was the same with Beck. All you need is a common man who loves his wife and children more than he loves himself," he replied glibly.

"And William?" Marko asked just above a whisper.

"I don't recall the name of the poison. It was put into his food at first, and then into the tonics he drank to get well."

Marko Corin sat back, pale and deeply shaken.

"Have you heard enough, sire?" Tullmoore asked, concerned by the toll this confession was taking. Corin was the key figure at what was potentially the most important meeting of any of their lives in but a short few hours time.

Corin nodded and Voreskae was yanked up and out.

"You'll trust us to dispose of him as we see fit?" Tullmoore asked.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for what you learned, sire."

Corin nodded. "Thank you for your help, General."

"I hope we find Zephyr soon," Tullmoore said.

"Him, I will kill myself," Corin declared.

* * * *

PREPARATIONS FOR THE CONFERENCE were carefully monitored from both camps. Instructions were adhered to and, at noon, Marko Corin and ten of his generals entered the hall, the second group to arrive.

Their black and silver uniforms were impressive, their fine, leather boots noisy on the marble floor. However, it was Corin himself who drew the most attention. His physical appearance was striking. He was an uncommonly handsome man and he possessed the demeanor of a king. Not only was he a king, he was descended from a long line of kings.

As the delegation from Bellux-Abry approached, Rehan Isolde rose from his seat in middle of the long table. "If I may," he began. "This is Marko Corin, king of Bellux-Abry," he said, gesturing to Corin.

Corin gave a stiff nod. "Rehan Isolde," he returned. "Heir to the throne of Nawllah." He turned his gaze to Lucas McKeaf. "And you are General McKeaf."

The McKeaf did not respond, except to look at Corin with eyes so similar to that of his daughter's, it made it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

"And these are four of his sons," Isolde quickly continued.
"Anthony, David, Thomas and Dane."

Each nodded at the mention of his name.

Corin studied each for a few moments, lingering the longest on Dane, who bore a striking resemblance to his Jade. They detested him. That much was apparent. Ammey had come by her initial feelings for him quite naturally, he realized. How did she feel now? His stomach tightened with trepidation at the thought.

* * * *

"ARE YOU ALRIGHT?" Kidder asked softly. Ammey was trembling as she watched Corin's arrival through a crack in

the library doors. He had happily agreed to stay with her, but he felt at a loss as to what to say or do for her. She was pale and looked very close to tears.

"Let's sit and have some port," he suggested. "They're going to be on introductions awhile more."

She turned away from the door. "Thank you for being here, Kidder."

"I'm happy to be here, Ammey. Come," he said as he took hold of her arm and led her over to a pair of soft chairs. "Sit." He poured them each a glass of port and handed her one.

"Thank you." She sipped the amber port. It was strong.

"You didn't answer my question," he reminded her.

"What question was that?"

"Are you alright?"

She thought about it. "I feel.... lost."

"You have been through a great deal."

She looked toward the double doors. "I dreamed of my friend Julia last night."

"Oh?"

She looked back at him to gage his reaction. "I think she was truly there."

"Perhaps she was."

"I miss her."

Ammey was changed, he realized. There was a sadness within her now. "I wish I could help."

She smiled a slight smile. "You are."

"You are very loved, Ammey McKeaf," he said gently. Her smile disappeard and a wounded look crossed her features

and he perched forward, sorry for having caused it. "What is it? Why do you look like that?"

She shook her head. Her throat ached too badly to speak.

"Tell me," he begged. "What is it?"

"I've done n-nothing but ... hurt people," she whispered.

"That's not true," he declared emphatically.

She looked away from him and tried to collect herself.

"Ammey, that is not true!"

"My family—"

"Had some shocks to deal with," he interjected. "Yes. But they are proud of you. You should have seen their faces when we told them about the fight at the alehouse. And when they heard how you protected Graybil's wife and child. Ah, they were lit up with pride. All of them."

She smiled weakly and reached for his hand, grateful for his effort.

He squeezed her hand. "You have saved lives. You are a strong woman with a good heart."

"And what do I do now?" she asked, leaning back in her chair.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Everything."

"Well, if that's all—"

She smiled. "I want to go home. I want to have dinner with my family. I want to see all the friends I will never see again. I want this war to be over. I want not to hurt anyone."

"And Corin? Do you want to go back to Bellux-Abry?" She thought about it. "I—"

"It doesn't make you a bad person, if that's your wish," he said.

"What about Vincent?" she asked softly.

Kidder realized this was the great conflict. She was torn between men—the warrior who was her first love and the king who had claimed her, who claimed her still, whose claim could save a nation. "Vincent loves you," he said tenderly. "You know that. He would give his life for you. But you're only one person. You have only one life and one heart. What does your heart tell you?"

* * * *

"WE WILL EACH AGREE to a secession of hostilities and to the immediate withdrawal and disbanding of troops," Isolde said.

"I can not agree to the disbanding," Corin replied carefully. "As to the rest, I agree. On the condition I am able to speak with my wife."

"She is not your wife," Lucas McKeaf retorted, unable to stop himself.

"I wish to see her," Corin repeated heatedly.

"You cannot put the weight of this responsibility on her shoulders," David McKeaf spoke up. "She has borne quite enough."

"The responsibility is not hers, it is mine. And the truce is agreed to. My army will withdraw."

"And the future?" Anthony McKeaf asked.

"I do not plan on a renewal of hostilities, knowing what I now know. But I did say I wished to see her." His eyes zeroed in on Alexander Kievnall. "It was part of our agreement."

"You know she is my daughter," the McKeaf said.

Corin looked at him. "I know it now. I did not know before."

Isolde was growing anxious the McKeaf would destroy the fragile peace they had weaved. "She is here, and she is agreed."

Corin pushed back his chair and stood.

"You will remain where we can see you," Lucas McKeaf stated flatly.

Isolde looked at Tom. "Will you get her?"

Tom glanced at his father and then got to his feet. He walked across the floor to the library doors and entered, closing the doors behind him again. Ammey and Kidder turned to him. "Are you ready?" he asked his sister. "He's asking to see you."

Ammey looked at Kidder and he gave her an encouraging nod.

"Father requires that you stay where we can see you," Tom added.

Ammey set down her glass and got to her feet. The pressure in her chest was immense.

Kidder rose, too, and reached out to steady her. She seemed the most fragile when she tried to appear strong. "We can open the doors and then he can come in here," he said quietly. "That way, your father can see you, and you can have some privacy."

She nodded and walked to the doors behind Tom and Kidder. They each opened a door wide and then continued into the great hall. The men gathered at the table all stood, having seen her. She reached out to steady herself against a door. She couldn't breathe. She watched as Marko stepped from the table and came toward her.

"Let's sit," Isolde urged. "Give them a moment."

Lucas sent a cold look his way, before turning back to watch Corin close in on his daughter. He would not sit or turn his eyes away until he knew she was safe.

* * * *

SHE WAS SO BEAUTIFUL to behold; Marko couldn't stare hard enough. He stopped directly in front of her, hopefully blocking her from the curious, watchful eyes around the table. "I thought I lost you," he whispered.

Tears sprang to Marko's eyes and she felt overwhelmed and at a total loss for words.

"I've only just discovered I was the one who was lost," he added. "Can you forgive me?"

She nodded, realizing it was not only true; it was already done.

"Voreskae was executed this morning and Zephyr will be when we find him. I am so sorry, my love. I desired nothing more than to keep you safe."

"I know."

A look of pain crossed his features. "I did not know who you were—"

"I was going to tell you when Zephyr and Voreskae were gone," she said. Her voice sounded strange to her. It was because her throat was so very closed.

"Why couldn't you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"At first, you were the enemy," she reminded him, "—and I didn't want to be used as a pawn to hurt my family."

"That's what you thought would happen?"
"Yes."

He sighed, understanding her position. "It will take time for your family to accept me," he ventured to get her reaction.

She didn't respond, except to glance beyond him into the great room where they all waited and most of them watched.

"Ammey?"

She looked back at him. It was strange to have him call her by her real name.

He reached out and took hold of her hands. "That will take some getting used to," he admitted with a weak smile. "I still think of you as my Jade. As the woman who saved me, who reclaimed my soul." He gazed into her glorious green eyes, but could not discern what she was thinking. She seemed torn and terribly fragile.

He brought her hands to his mouth and kissed each of them, just as Vincent had done. It caused conflict to wrench and twist at her heart.

"You will return with me?" Marko asked quietly. "Tell me you will."

She hesitated. "I need to return home for a time."

He bit his tongue to keep from overreacting. "How long?"

"We need time to recover."

"You can recover at home, at the palace," he clarified. "I need you. I need you by my side."

"I n-need time with my family first," she stammered.

She was trembling. He felt terrible for pressing her but, given time, her family could turn her against him. "How long? I have to know how long."

"Spring," she said. "You may send for me in the spring." He let out the breath he was holding. "Promise me?" She nodded stiffly.

"And we'll marry officially," he said. "I would prefer to do it now, but—"

She felt herself trembling. Why could she not clear Vincent's face from her mind? "Marko—" she whispered.

He pressed her hand against his heart so she could feel it's furious thudding. "You're all I want," he swore. "All I am and all I have is yours. Take it. I beg you."

"I will come in the spring," she pledged. "That is all I can promise for now."

"Sire?" someone called from behind them. It was time to resume the truce agreement.

He realized he would have to accept her decision for the time being. She had made a promise to come to him in the spring, and so she would. He trusted her word. "Perhaps we can bring your family and win them over," he said hopefully.

She gave him a weak smile. "We can ask."

He was encouraged by the words and by her smile. "Come back in with me now. Sit with me."

"No," she said beseechingly. "Please." She couldn't bear her father scrutinizing her expression, poor Alexander looking devastated, and her brothers watching to gage her feelings. She did not even know her feelings; how could they? It wasn't simple. Nothing was simple.

"Alright. But I cannot abide not seeing you until spring. We will meet here tomorrow. I'll arrange it with your father. It will be just you and I."

"And a dozen guards," she said drolly.

He smiled that she could still tease. "The thought of being with you tomorrow is the only way I can let you go now. I could not do it, otherwise." He released her hands and backed up a step. "Until tomorrow?"

She nodded.

* * * *

CORIN SAT BACK DOWN and saw the library doors had been closed.

"We should sign the agreement," Isolde reminded everyone.

Corin looked at Lucas McKeaf. "Your daughter will return home with you and stay until the spring. I will send for her then, or for all of you, if you care to come. You will be welcome. It is my intention to marry her at that time ... in an official ceremony, but I will not without it being her desire."

Lucas McKeaf nodded, relieved to hear that she was returning home with them and that Corin would not insist on marriage as a prerequisite to the agreement. "I accept that."

"We would like to meet on the morrow," Corin continued. "Here. Just she and I and whatever protection you feel is necessary, of course. Name the number and I will match it."

"Five," Anthony spoke up. A low number would put him at ease, and they could send Forzenay's Five and remove Corin as an obstacle once and for all.

"Five it is," Corin agreed.

"And the withdrawal of the troops?" Isolde asked.

"Can begin immediately," Corin replied.

* * * *

VINCENT LEFT the General's tent, unable to endure any more discussion about Marko Corin. It had been decided, after a heated debate, that they would not attempt to kill him. Which meant, Ammey would go to him in the spring. It meant she would eventually be his wife. What you seek is not to be. Milainah had warned him.

Kidder and Forzenay followed him. "Vincent," Kidder called.

Vincent stopped, but did not turn around.

They caught up to him. "I know this is difficult for you," Kidder said. "It is for her, as well."

Vincent gave him a dark scowl.

"It is," Kidder assured him. "She loves you."

"But she'll marry him," Vincent retorted.

Kidder shook his head. "I don't know that. Neither do you."

"I'm leaving," Vincent said.

"To go where?" Forzenay asked.

"I don't know. Cala, perhaps. I've never been to Cala."

Forzenay gave Kidder a look, and Kidder clapped Vincent's shoulder, then started back toward camp.

"Our alliance with the seidh is a precious thing," Forzenay said.

Vincent looked at him, wondering what that had to do with anything.

"It gives us insight few have," Forzenay continued.

"Do you have a point to make?" Vincent asked crossly.

"This seems over, decided, does it not?" Forzenay asked.

"Yes. It seems over."

"It is not."

Vincent turned to him and studied his face. "What do you mean?"

"There are men who have gotten the taste of power in their mouths. It's like a taste for blood; they crave more and more until it is all they know. Men are greedy and the gods are restless. What seems over is not. It's just begun."

Vincent felt a strange tingling. "That sounds like something the seidhkona would say."

"Because it is," Forzenay replied.

"Well, I loathe poetry and riddles," Vincent said heatedly.
"Talk to me in practical terms."

"I cannot tell you what I do not know. I only know—"

"What?" Vincent snapped.

"That you should not go far."

Vincent looked away. He was antsy with agitation.

"We've been invited to the Forge ... for a rest," Forzenay continued. "A period of recovery."

Vincent shook his head. "I cannot be with her if I am to lose her."

Forzenay sighed. "I've told you what I can, my friend. What seems over is not. Do what you must, but know that."

Vincent walked on. He walked until he came to the bank of the Rhannalinx River. The world looked colorless. The wind was blowing, the water choppy. On the opposite bank, the army of Bellux-Abry was tearing down tents and moving out. By this time tomorrow, the great majority of men on both sides would be moving out, trudging back to their respective homes.

He tugged his cloak tighter, then turned and headed back toward camp, glad the cold wind was at his back. He would go to the Forge. He would go because he couldn't do otherwise. Not when she was there. Not when they had an opportunity to be together. Hope was a strong branch in the threatening waters of despair. Perhaps he was a fool, but he would cling to it. If it broke, he risked drowning, but life was risk. An hour ago, his life had seemed pointless. It had seemed over. But what seemed over what not. It was not!

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