

BOOK OF DRAGONS

BOOK THREE IN THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN

VOLUME FIVE OF FIVE



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Book of Dragons – Volume 5

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Chapter One

The Oirat reached the entrance of the underground city of Heese by late afternoon two days later. Here, the Ujugar cliffs were not as sheer; they draped down from the imposing heights of Ondur Dobu like sprawled and groping fingers of stone. As it approached its confluence with the Dalda, the swift current of the Okin River yielded to shallow, burbling channels spread among frost-crusting islands of sparse witch-grass and graveled ground. As the waning, golden glow of the sun seeped among the sloping mountainsides, they could see the entry ahead of them, and the entire party drew to an awestruck halt.

“Tengeriin boshig,” Toghrul whispered, drawing the blade of his hand to his brow to shield his marveling gaze from the glare.

“There it is, oyotona. Do you see?” Aigiarn said to Temu, her voice soft and breathless with wonder. “It is Heese, just like Rhyden promised.”

Rhyden might have promised them Heese, and he might have had memories of the place seared into his mind, but even these had not prepared him for the actual sight of the Abhacan city. He had been to Iarnrod, the enormous royal city of Tirurnua, enough times to fairly well find his way along its streets blindfolded, but he had never seen anything like this. Iarnrod was built to be a fortress city-state -- like all Abhacan cities constructed after the fourth or fifth dynasty. The influx of men and their tenacious efforts to claim lands from the Abhacan had forced the diminutive race to retreat beneath their mountains, to use their cities as fortified sanctuaries against the continuous threat of invasion.

Such fortifications had come to Heese, but the city had been built long before this, during a renaissance period in Abhacan architecture Rhyden had never even heard about. To enter Iarnrod, visitors had to pass through long, treacherous ravines carved among mountain peaks, and then through massive, nigh-impenetrable iron doors. Rhyden knew from the gazriin ezen’s memories that beyond the threshold they now rode toward, a similar iron barrier had been constructed. However, Heese had once been a nexus for culture and activity in Tirgeimhreadh; it had welcomed visitors from all

races with opened arms. Rather than the cold and uninviting entrance of Iarnrod, Heese had been graced with a magnificent threshold, a place that reminded guests of the might of the people who had once called the city home, and yet drew them inside, likely as enthralled as the Oirat now stood.

Six broad stairs, hewn from the granite of the cliff base led up to a portico framed by a colonnade of six towering columns, each at least twenty feet high. The roof of the portico sloped upward along the mountainside; an entablature carved out of the cliff itself. A huge archway of stone more than thirty feet across crowned the top, flanked by two massive pillars hewn in relief. The entire magnificent structure was adorned with relief sculptures and inscriptions, intricate and elaborate renditions of Abhacan runes and mythological characters, kings and armies, triumphant battles and the splendor the Abhacans had enjoyed in their daily lives.

A solitary doorway, fifteen feet tall, stood in the center of the portico's far wall. There was nothing but darkness beyond; the door crossed into a tunnel that led toward the belly of the mountain.

"Mathair Maith," Rhyden breathed. *Good Mother*. "It is incredible!"

Towering above the portico, perched against the slopes of the Ujugar was a dragon, an enormous, hulking sculpture chiseled out of the mountainside. It stood twice again as tall as the threshold, with its broad wings draped back against the cliffs, its immense, crested head turned eastward, away from the glow of the waning sun. This colossal sentry had been meticulously, magnificently hewn from the granite, and nearly seemed lifelike in its stunning grace and detail. As the fading light of the sun spilled upon the dragon's form, it seemed aglow, bathed in gold, and Temu gasped softly.

"It is Ag'iamon," he whispered, looking at Yeb, his eyes bright and wide with excitement. "Look, Yeb -- it is Ag'iamon!"

"It would seem we are in the right place, then," Yeb said, his own eyes round with wonder as he looked at the dragon.

While the dragon was likely carved at a much later date -- probably millennia -- after the threshold itself, time and the elements had taken their tolls upon both of the granite structures. As the Oirat reined their bergelmirs toward the structure, they could see tumbled piles of debris littering the ground and riverbanks where the cliff slopes had

yielded and crumbled. They had found evidence of other such landslides all along their passage through the Qotoyor Berke ravine. Four days earlier, they had discovered skeletal remains among the debris of one such old avalanche. They had found signs all through the route of the party of Oirat Yesugei had dispatched with Inalchuk years earlier: old, abandoned campsites, with charred marks in the graveled riverbank still apparent enough to mark where fires had been built, small tools, needles or food packets fallen and forgotten from Oirat bogcuss. Of this party, only Inalchuk had survived to return to the Nuqut and with the discovery of the sun-bleached skulls and battered bones, it seemed they had learned the fates of those who had traveled with him.

At Heese, the broad foundation of the stairs had cracked in places, dark tendrils riving the stone. The bases of the columns, and the tapered edges of the dragon's extremities along its wingtips, crest and snout were all were visibly worn and eroded. Many of the relief panels framing the walls were indecipherable from millennia of wind, rain and snow. Water had seeped into miniscule cracks in the stone, and countless winters had seen it turn to ice, crumbling the granite. Despite this abuse, the entrance remained glorious and the granite glowed as if infused with gold as the last rays of sun fell upon it.

"The baga'han built all of this?" Temu asked.

"A long, long time ago they did, yes, Temu," Yeb said, nodding.

"I do not understand," Temu said, puzzled. "Rhyden said they are little, short like me. Why would they build something so big if they were so small?"

Yeb smiled at him. "Small does not necessarily mean weak, Temu," he said. "Perhaps the baga'han meant only to remind others of this."

Juchin made a *harrumphing* noise in his throat as he frowned, shifting his weight in his saddle, aggravated by their delay. He had dispatched four Kelet riders behind them shortly after they had found Jobin Dunster along the banks of the Okin. The sentries had rejoined them that morning to report more than two hundred Khahl Minghan warriors rode less than five hours behind them. Despite these superior numbers, the Khahl seemed to be making no great effort to quicken their pace, or close the distance with the Oirat any further.

“They want to follow us all of the way to the lair,” Aigiarn had said, her brows drawn angrily. She had spat against the ground. “They might have burned marks into Targutai’s breast to fool their people, but they know they cannot fool the Tengri gods -- or the dragons. They need Temu to open the lair.”

Every moment the Oirat wasted lingering idle and awestruck was another that could be used to elude the encroaching Kahl, and Juchin knew it. He loped his bergelmir ahead of the group, drawing it to a skittering halt at the bottom of the staircase. He swung his leg around the weasel’s saddle and dropped to the ground, tromping up the stairs.

“We are not the first to arrive,” he said grimly, nodding toward the colonnade. There were small, bundled forms lying among the debris and crumbled stone on the risers. Juchin genuflected beside one and reached down, lifting the crusted, dry-rotted corner of a wool blanket in his hand. He looked at Aigiarn. “More l’uitan children,” he said. He glanced around at the stairs and terrace, rising to his feet. “At least twenty of them here, just like Rhyden said the map described.”

His feet cross over a sacred threshold, Aigiarn remembered Rhyden reciting to her. “Secret door into Beneath,” she whispered aloud, stricken. “Where the bodies of children keep watch and seven stars bear mute witness to His passage.”

Juchin looked up at her, his hand planted on the pommel of his scimitar. “The ground here is unstable,” he said. “Golomto has stirred in her sleep, and mountains have tumbled.” He glanced at Rhyden. “Come with me. You and I will go together. Take me to this gate inside. We will see if it is safe to pass. Mukhali, you as well, and you, Alchi -- both of you with me.”

Two of the Uru’ut Kelet swung themselves down from their saddles, the heavy soles of their gutal stomping loudly against the ground. Aigiarn hooked her hand against the pommel ridge of her saddle and hopped from her bergelmir as well. “I am going with you.”

Juchin raised his brow at her. “My Khanum,” he said. “It is not -- ”

“ -- open to debate, Juchin,” Aigiarn finished for him, marching up the stairs. “I am going with you. Jelmei, light some torches. You are with me. Toghrul, keep with Temu until we get back.”

Toghrul and Juchin exchanged quick looks, but neither man offered Aigiarn any further protest. They both knew better.

Rhyden glanced at Jobin as he dismounted his bergelmir. The crewman's eyes were still enormous; he had not recovered yet from his initial shock of seeing the enormous Abhacan threshold. He blinked at Rhyden as though emerging from a dream.

"That...that is a bloody dragon," he said softly. "A bloody damn dragon carved out of the rot damn mountainside."

Rhyden smiled. "Yes, it is."

"Are they really that big?" Jobin asked.

"I think they are a bit smaller than that," Rhyden said. "That one was probably carved so large to be sure the Oirat would see it when they came."

Jobin shook his head, whistling. "They would have to be bloody blind to miss it."

"Stay in the saddle," Rhyden told him. "You will be safe here."

"Here?" Jobin blinked again, this time at the bergelmir. "All by myself on this thing?"

"It is called a bergelmir," Rhyden said. "She is fairly well like a horse once you get accustomed to her."

"I...I was never one much for horses," Jobin said. "What do I do if it moves?"

Rhyden smiled at him. "She will not go anywhere," he said, and he patted his palm against the bergelmir's shoulder, drawing a quiet little grumble from the weasel.

"Do not worry for that."

The six of them climbed the stairs together, all of them tilting their heads back as the ceiling of the portico drooped its heavy shadow upon them. Up close, the sprawling threshold seemed all the more immense. Rhyden walked slowly toward the opened door, his eyes widening as he studied the runic inscriptions engraved in the stone doorway. He could read the characters, but not through any knowledge on his part. He could read them because the Abhacan mage had been able to and as Rhyden realized what they were, he drew to a stumbling, breathless halt.

"What is it?" Aigiarn asked. She held a burning torch aloft in one hand, keeping the other curled at the ready around her scimitar hilt. When Rhyden stopped, she did likewise, following his gaze with her own.

“These...hoah, these are second dynasty,” Rhyden said softly, stepping toward the wall. He brushed his fingertips against the inscribed runes, his face softening with wonder. “Aigiarn, no one has written these characters in nearly ten thousand years.”

“What do they say?” Juchin asked. “Can you read them?”

“I can now,” Rhyden murmured, following the line of rune characters with his eyes as they arced around the doorframe. “It says, *Blessed and welcome is he whose feet cross this threshold in friendship, for all of the splendors in all of the world have been drawn by these waters, nurtured by these slopes. Yet woe to he who would mark this passage as foe, for the might of the white-currents and the indomitable strength of stone ever lie, too, in the Beneath.*”

He blinked, astounded by the ease with which the translation came to his mind and tongue. Had he only just weeks earlier struggled for days at a time to decipher even a single line of eighth dynastic rune writings into the common tongue? He doubted there was an Abhacan scholar in the whole of Iarnrod who could have read the inscription before him -- in ten seconds, as he had done, or ten thousand years. The primitive characters he was looking at had not been seen or comprehended as language by any living being in nearly ten millennia.

Juchin *harrumphed* again, hoisting his torch high and brushing past Rhyden as he stepped across the threshold. “Sain bainuu to you, too, dead baga’han,” he muttered in greeting, his voice reverberating quietly against the high, arched ceilings of stone in the tunnel beyond.

The two Uru’ut Kelet followed him, though Toghrul’s soldier, Jelmei hung back, waiting for Aigiarn. She touched Rhyden’s sleeve, offering a slight tug to attract his enchanted gaze.

“Do you know what they would give to see this in Iarnrod?” he asked her. “What they would do to know the things that are in my head now, a part of me? I know things that their ancestors had even forgotten. I can read this, Aigiarn.”

She smiled at him. It had been too long since she had seen that spark of child-like wonder in his eyes; since they had lost the map to the white-waters of the Urlug, and since his assault by the gazriin ezen, it had all but faded from him. She had seen the sorrow and shock in his eyes two days earlier, when he had learned of his friend,

Aedhir's death, and had nearly lost any hope of ever seeing such eager amazement within him again.

He realized her fond attention and color stoked in his cheeks, just as it would every time she had interrupted his efforts in translating the map, snapping him from his reveries. "Hoah, well," he said, stepping back from the wall. "Another time, maybe."

They crossed the threshold and followed Juchin and the Uru'ut down the vaulted corridor. In Rhyden's mind, through the gazriin ezen's memories, he could see that the floor had once been adorned with a bright mosaic of intricately arranged, multicolored tiles. Thousands of years' worth of dirt, dust and gravel had made its way through the doorway, obliterating any trace of the pattern beneath a thick layer of compacted grime. The walls had once been decorated with painted relief panels that had stretched from floor to ceiling but the fresco paints had long since faded and worn away, leaving behind only the dim outlines of the carvings they had once covered, draped in dancing shadows by the light of their torches.

"Ikhama have used this for a den," Juchin said from ahead of them. He and the Kelet had paused, looking down at a large pile of scattered driftwood and dirt. He knelt, keeping his torch raised. He drew his dagger from his belt and poked at the remains of an old nest. "I see paw prints in the dirt here -- lots of them -- some matted fur, dried scat, animal bones." He looked over his shoulder at Aigiarn as he stood. "That door has stood open a long time. This place is probably full of them."

Juchin tucked his knife back at his waist, exchanging it for his scimitar. "Have a care," he said to his Kelet, as they, too drew their swords. "Narsana favor building pack dens around riverbanks, too. We do not know what we might find here."

They walked deeper into the tunnel. They saw no physical signs of looting, though there was enough destruction tendered by animals and the elements to easily obliterate any such indications. They did find more evidence of the l'uitan once being familiar with Heese, and the lair's location. They passed numerous broken pottery vessels, broad-rimmed bowls that lay shattered on the floor. Juchin paused again at one, kneeling and studying the fragments. He pushed them aside with his hand, brushing his fingertips against a smear of soot left ground into the floor. "Cinders," he

said. "Ceremonial incense. The l'uitan shamans must have used this corridor for sacred rituals."

He found some small pieces of bone nearby in the dirt, and he lifted one, frowning thoughtfully at it. For a horrified moment, Aigiarn thought it was a bone from one of the sacrificed children, and her breath tangled in her throat. When Juchin next picked up an elongated skull -- obviously that of some kind of animal -- she let out an audible breath of relief.

"Either ikhama dragged these in here, carcasses from the river, or the shamans left gifts for the dragons," Juchin said thoughtfully, cradling the skull against the basin of his gloved palm. "Prey left for the spirits of hunters."

He dropped the skull and stood, taking his scimitar in hand again. "How much further, Rhyden?"

"Not much," Rhyden said. "It hooks to the left up here, and from there, straight until it ends."

"At another gate?" Juchin said, and Rhyden nodded.

"A fortified iron gate," he said. "To protect the city from invasion. The Abhacan left it open when they abandoned Heese."

"If we close the gate when we are through, could the Khahl open it again?" Aigiarn asked.

"No," Rhyden said. "Not from the outside. Not even if they had a battering ram and a month to try. It is plated iron -- at least three feet thick."

"Any other way for them to get into the city?" she asked.

Rhyden raised his brow. "They could climb Ondur Dobu for the next two weeks, go beyond the snowline and try to reach the old agricultural plateaus."

The corner of Aigiarn's mouth lifted in a pleased smile. "Good enough," she said. "I say we close the gate behind us."

They continued on, rounding a corner as Rhyden had told them. As they approached the end of the hallway, Juchin and the Kelet paused. "I think we have a problem," Juchin said, glancing over his shoulder at Rhyden.

Rhyden squinted against the glare of Juchin's torch. "Bugger me."

They had reached the fortified gate of Heese. This section of the corridor had obviously seen significant damage meted upon it in long-past earth tremors. Portions of the walls had collapsed, littering the floor with deep, thick piles of rubble and dirt. He could see the threshold of the gate beyond the debris and to his dismay, found it closed. In his mind, the gazriin ezen's memories clearly showed the gate raised and opened; however, in reality, it seemed to have collapsed along the tracks gouged for it in its frame of granite. It listed clumsily to one side, filling the gateway. The bottom corner, left tilted skyward at a sharp angle might have still offered them access, if only the wall in front of it had not crumbled down, spilling a mound of rock and soil taller than Rhyden could reach on his tiptoes, with both hands fully stretched above his head.

"Bugger me," Rhyden said again, aghast. He ducked past Juchin's arm and walked toward the gate, shaking his head in shocked disbelief.

"What happened to it?" Jelmei asked.

"It is raised and lowered by counterbalances," Rhyden said, studying the angle of the gate in its frame. "Tethered to the gate by chains that run through pulleys..." He pointed to the walls. "...on the other side. The balances could be raised or lowered with capstans -- wheels that would wind the chains one way or the other. One of these landslides must have broken the chains on this side of the gate, sent it crashing down."

He started up a slope of rubble near the highest tilted portion of the gate. There was a slight opening here, where the top of the gate met the upper corner of the frame. Not enough room for even Temu to wriggle through, but enough that perhaps Rhyden could shine a light beyond and investigate.

"What are you doing?" Aigiarn said, climbing after him.

"There is a small opening here, where the gate is leaning," he said. "I am going to see if there is any chain left visible on the other side. Maybe we can rig it somehow if there is. Draw a line through it..." He glanced over his shoulder and paused. "This is not stable ground," he said, his brows rising in concern. "Go back, Aigiarn. Let me look."

She looked beyond his shoulder toward the top of the gate frame. "That?" she said. "You will not see anything through there. You cannot fit your head through." She turned and called to Jelmei. "Go back to the bergelmirs -- get me an oil lamp. Hurry now."

Jelmei nodded, turning on his gutal heel and running back along the corridor.

“Aigiarn,” Rhyden said. “Let me do it. I can fit.”

“You cannot,” she replied, frowning. “I am the smallest of us, except for Temu, and I will be damned if I am going to let my son poke his head through there. I will fit. You tell me what to look for, and I will tell you if I see it.”

Rhyden looked at Juchin, helplessly. Juchin shrugged, as if to tell him, *Sorry, lad. There is no arguing with her when her head gets fixed on something. You are on your own.*

“Scoot over,” Aigiarn said, tromping past him. She slapped the back of her hand lightly against his belly as she moved. “Tell me what I am supposed to look for.”

“Aigiarn...” he began again, but she was having none of his protests. She knelt at the crest of the sloping rubble, thrusting the end of her torch into the dirt and rocks to hold it upright. She leaned forward, hooking her hand against the exposed lip of the gate top, and ducked her head through the opening experimentally.

“I can fit,” she said, her voice muffled. She scooted back, and turned to him. “I can get my head through, and my arm, too, with a lamp.”

Jelmei returned with a lamp in hand. Aigiarn lit the wick and then eased her way through the cramped opening again. Rhyden knelt behind her, supporting her hips with his hands to steady her should her gutal soles decide to slip for purchase in the loose gravel.

“Can you see anything?” he asked. “Does it open all of the way through?”

“I think so,” Aigiarn said, her voice dim. She wriggled against him, trying to inch her arm and the lamp further ahead of her. “The gate is thick...I cannot lean out over the other side. There is a lot of dirt here, too. I think the landslides might have damaged the tunnels on this side, as well. There is...some kind of wheel below me, sticking out of the rocks...buried somewhat.”

“One of the pulley wheels,” Rhyden said, nodding. The iron gate had been raised and lowered by a pair of thick, sturdy chains that had been anchored at the base of the gate, and drawn taut along each of its outermost edges. The chains had fed through pulleys just above the top of the gate; from here, they had each coiled around large wooden spools that had been connected to the ground below by wooden masts

protruding from hand-turned capstans. Six Abhacan sentries had manned the capstans during Heese's occupation, three per wheel, to turn the masts and crank the chains. Beyond each spool, the chains were connected via pulleys to enormous stone counterbalances; as the counters lowered toward the floor, the gate would rise. Turn the capstan in the opposite direction to raise the counterbalances, and the gate would lower.

"Do you see a beam of wood running floor to ceiling?" he asked Aigiarn, leaning toward her shoulders. "It will look like one of the knar masts almost, long and somewhat slender."

She paused for a moment, shifting her weight as she moved her light around. "No," she called back. "No...wait...there is something below me, in the rubble, like a spear shaft, or maybe a mast. It is broken. There is not much unburied."

"Damn it," Rhyden muttered. There was piss rot luck if ever he had heard of it. It sounded like the tunnel wall had collapsed directly on top of the capstan, splintering the mast and snapping through the chains. If the mast had remained, they might have been able to attach ropes to it, and re-feed the chain through the spool, manipulate it somehow to raise the gate from their side of the threshold.

"Do you see any chain?" he asked. "It will be big, Aigiarn, with heavy links."

"No," she replied. "Nothing like that at all."

He had feared that; the landslides had not only broken the chains -- they had bloody buried them both on the far side of the wall under tons of dirt and rock. There would be no retrieving them.

"Bad tidings?" Juchin asked from below, not missing the frustrated, disappointed expression on Rhyden's face.

"The worst, Juchin," Rhyden said. He tapped his hand against Aigiarn's shoulder. "Come back now. There is nothing left of the mechanism that opened the gate. It is all smashed or buried."

Aigiarn wriggled out of the opening. Rhyden helped her to her feet and they carefully made their way to the tunnel floor again.

"We could dig through this," Juchin said, nodding to indicate the rubble. "The gate is leaning and this end is open behind the dirt. We could dig through."

“It would take us hours -- days, even,” Aigiarn said. “We do not have time, Juchin.”

Juchin raised his brow at her. “The Khahl will wait,” he said. “They need Temu to open the lair. They will bide their time.” He looked at the debris again. “We have enough men, and bergelmirs to haul the heavy loads. If we worked the night through, into the dawn, we could clear a path.” Aigiarn still looked dubious, and he added, “Or we can take two weeks -- and likely freeze to death beyond the snowline above -- hiking the slopes of Ondur Dobu to reach those farming plateaus Rhyden mentioned.”

Aigiarn frowned. “Alright,” she said, sighing in begrudging concession. “We dig. Let us go and tell the others we are making camp here tonight.”

“I can help,” Jobin said to Rhyden, reaching out and catching the Elf by the arm. He and Rhyden had set up a small tent on the grounds surrounding the Abhacan portico, and Rhyden had explained that he needed to go and help the Oirat men dig through the rubble of the collapsed tunnel. The Oirat were going in shifts to clear the fortified city gate free of debris, and Rhyden had volunteered to go among the first.

“Please,” Jobin said. “I want to help. I am not too weak for it.”

Rhyden smiled, clapping his hand against Jobin’s. “Lie down and rest awhile,” he said. “Get some sleep if you can. I know all of this riding has exhausted you. Let the rest of us worry with the digging.”

Jobin was not particularly enthused by the prospect of hard labor, but he would have willingly strapped a harness laden with stones to his own shoulders if it meant he did not have to remain at the cluster of Oirat tents with the creepy little boy, Temuchin. The kid’s mother, Aigiarn, remained behind as well -- albeit reluctantly -- but that did little to assuage Jobin’s misgivings.

“I am not helpless,” she had told Rhyden only moments earlier, planting her hands on her hips and lifting her chin so she could glower at him.

“I know, Aigiarn,” he had said. “But someone should keep with Temu. The Khahl are too close. No matter what Juchin says, they might try something.”

“Yeb is here,” Aigiarn had protested, to which Jobin had thought, *Hoah, splendid! There is a comfort.*

The Oirat shaman had been pleasant enough, if not friendly in his regard toward Jobin, but there was something in his eyes whenever Jobin looked at him. There was something in the set of his brows that let Jobin know all too well that despite Yeb's affable exterior, he did not trust Jobin any more than Temuchin did.

Rhyden had drawn Aigiarn aside and after a few moments of quiet implore, she had relented. She had not been very happy about staying behind, but had at least begrudgingly agreed to it.

Aigiarn was a beautiful woman, stunning, in fact. Her rounded, exotic features and lean but well-curved figure ordinarily would have roused Jobin's interest -- not to mention other portions of him -- and he might not have minded remaining at the camp, despite her creepy son, save for the fact Jobin knew he would not have a whore's chance in a cathedral with her. First of all, though Aigiarn was petite, she wielded that wickedly hooked sword of hers with as much dexterity as any of the men among them; she could trounce his ass if he tried.

Secondly, she and Rhyden Fabhcun were bugging each other with admirable fervency. Jobin had overheard their efforts from beneath the flaps of their tent the night before when he had tromped past it on his way to relieve himself. He had crouched in the shadows for a long time, listening to the faint sounds of Aigiarn's breathless voice, whimpers that rose into a quiet, gasping crescendo. He had listened to the sounds of them moving together, and an envious sort of ire had stoked in him.

Captain Fainne is dead, he had thought. Deag, Phelim -- bloody all of the lads dead because of him, because we thought he was in danger, and all along he has been safe and sound, cadging his jollies between that Oirat bitch's thighs.

And then it had occurred to him. *If his pants are off, his belt and belt pouch likely are, too.*

He had blinked, his eyes flown wide. He had waited a bit longer in the darkness as their murmured conversation and soft laughter together dimmed to silence, and then Jobin had crept toward Rhyden's tent. He had looked about, but no one had been watching. He had dropped to his knees and listened for any noise coming from beyond the flap. There had been only the soft sounds of slumbering breaths; they had worn themselves out apparently, and were asleep. He had drawn the flap aside and peered

around in the shadow-draped tent. Aigiarn had been tucked against Rhyden, the two of them dim shadows draped beneath a pile of heavy furs and blankets.

Again, Jobin had been seized with rage, and he had frowned, his brows drawing together. *I have bloody suffered for you, you bastard rot*, he thought, glaring at Rhyden. *I have been shot at, half-starved, nearly frozen to death, trussed and blindfolded, dragged about by the scruff and vomited on -- all of it to save your sorry hide. And here you sleep with a nice bit of fluff snuggled up to you all tender-like. Rot damn bastard.*

He had spied Rhyden's clothes in a discarded pile to his left. There was little room inside the tent, and the clothes had been within easy reach. He had seen the hide pouch where Rhyden kept the sword hilt. He had reached for it, his hand outstretched, and then Rhyden had stirred, startling the wits from Jobin. He had scuttled backwards, breathless with fright as he saw Rhyden move slowly, beginning to sit up. Only then had he remembered: *Bloody rot, Elves can hear a mouse drop scat from a mile away...!*

He had scrambled from the tent, his boot soles skittering in the loose soil. He had hurried back to the campfire, hearing Rhyden call out hoarsely, groggily from inside the tent behind him. "Temu...? Temu, is that you?"

"Let me go with you," Jobin said to Rhyden, still clinging to his sleeve. "I feel rather useless to you all, and you have been kind to me...helped me." *Please do not make me stay here with that kid*, he thought, desperately. "Please, I want to help."

"You are my friend, Jobin," Rhyden said, smiling again. "I have not minded to help you." He eased himself gently away from Jobin's grasp. "Have some supper and try to rest. If you still feel up to it, maybe later we can go together."

Bastard, Jobin thought, thinking he would retch of his own volition if he had to gnaw his teeth loose of their moorings on anymore of the Oirat's dry-rotted meat. He watched Rhyden walk away -- the hide pouch fettered to his hip with the sword hilt tucked inside. *You bastard rot.*

He felt the weight of the boy, Temuchin's gaze without even hearing the child approach. He turned and found Temuchin standing behind him, his expression bewildered and somewhat wounded.

"Why are you angry with him?" Temu whispered. Jobin glanced about in sudden, bright alarm, but thankfully, Aigiarn had turned her attentions elsewhere. The shaman,

Yeb was helping build a fire in the center of the tents, and no one else was close enough at hand to overhear them.

Jobin backed away from the boy, his breath strangled in his throat. "Keep away from me."

"Rhyden said you were his friend. He cannot lie. He meant that," Temu said. "Why would you hate him?"

"Temuchin, Toghrul told you not to play along the riverbank," Aigiarn said, walking toward her son, her brows drawn in disapproval. "Look at your boots -- covered in mud! And your leggings are soaked." She caught him by the shoulders and spun him smartly about, marching him toward their tent. "Change them right now. That water is ice cold, and it is the middle of winter. Do you want to catch your death? Supper and straight to bed, oyotona. When Toghrul tells you something, you mind him. You know better."

Jobin took full advantage of the distraction to turn and hurry away, tearing his eyes away from the boy, even as Temu squirmed against his mother's grasp, trying to look over his shoulder toward Jobin.

What do you want here? Jobin heard Temuchin ask, his voice inside of Jobin's skull again. Jobin shoved his palms against his temples and winced.

Get out of my head! he thought desperately. *Leave me alone, you little bastard!*

Jobin retreated to the privacy of his tent. He lay against his pallet of blankets on the ground for hours, his eyes closed, pretending to be asleep in case Temu or anyone else decided to poke their head inside and check on him. He could hear the faint, rhythmic refrain of quiet drumbeats; the shaman, Yeb, was performing some sort of ritual. He had done as much the night before and Jobin had been hard-pressed to sleep, listening to the infernal racket of the shaman's little ceremonial drum thumping and whomping all night long.

It was more than the sound that annoyed him. The beating of the drum, and Yeb's indistinct, mumbled incantations seemed to stoke that little nest of spiders, or whatever Mongoljin had retched into him, into some sort of frenzy. He could feel it within him, like splayed, hooked fingertips clawing at the insides of his skull, scraping behind

his eyes, scurrying within the pit of his belly, twisting in his testicles. The previous night had been spent with his hands shoved over his eyes as he struggled against violent convulsions. He had forced himself not to scream, because he had known once he started, he would not stop until he had worn his voice raw, or until his mind had broken like a rotted, worm-infested melon. As he heard the drumbeats beginning anew that night, he could feel it stirring within him again, slithering and shivering through him in protest, and he gritted his teeth, shoving the heel of his palm against his temple.

If I had a bloody knife, I would shove it through that shaman's rotted gut, he thought. Shut up...shut up, you rot damn bastard...please shut up...!

As if he had shrieked this plea aloud, all at once, the drum measures fell still. Jobin heaved an audible sigh of relief, trembling as he lowered his hand from his face. Conversations about the campfire had not faltered in the least, and now he could hear the distant sounds of the Oirat men working in the tunnel -- the scraping and dragging of heavy loads of earth and stone -- as they echoed from Heese's wide threshold. He waited, his breath bated, wondering if the shaman would start his racket anew. When he did not, Jobin pressed his hand against his mouth and closed his eyes against grateful tears. He had not known if he would have been able to bear another night with the horrific sensation of Mongoljin crawling and squirming through him. He would have gone bloody mad, or skewered himself on the nearest blade he could have laid hands upon, he knew it.

He listened to the quiet conversations among the Oirat and dozed restlessly; he roused, his eyes flying wide in the darkness when he heard Rhyden and Aigiarn speaking quietly together, walking past his tent toward their own.

It was very late, surely close to midnight, though Jobin had no watch to tell by. He had deliberately pitched his tent within ready earshot of Rhyden's -- less than five feet from the Elf's, in fact. When Rhyden sighed wearily, it sounded as if he stood just beyond the flap of wool marking Jobin's threshold.

"We will be at it the night through at least," Rhyden said to Aigiarn, his voice hoarse and tired. "Twenty men working nonstop for what...? Seven hours now? Hoah...and we have not even made much of a dent in the rubble."

"Are you aching?" she asked, and Jobin heard the soft sound of them kissing.

"In places I never even realized I had," Rhyden told her, and she laughed quietly. Jobin heard the rustle of wool as they drew their tent flap aside and ducked within. Their voices grew muffled, but not too badly. He could still discern every word they exchanged.

"Where is Temu?" Rhyden asked.

"By the fire, curled up beside Yeb," Aigiarn said, the tone of her voice lending itself to a smile, Jobin thought.

"This is the fourth night now," Rhyden said, and Jobin heard him groan softly, as if stretching sore, tired muscles. "Is he upset, do you think? About this, I mean...about us. Do you think he is angry with me for it?"

"Temu could never be angry with you," Aigiarn said. "No, I think he is worried about Yeb. He has not been himself since Nala. Temu has always been sensitive about that sort of thing. He tries so hard to please so many, as if everything in the Bith...everyone's happiness is something he can control."

"You are worried about Yeb, too."

"Yes," Aigiarn said quietly, troubled. "I have never seen him like this, Rhyden. He has been so withdrawn since we found Nala. I know he cared about her...probably more than he even realized, and I was very hard on him when she ran away. I said some harsh things that I should not have. Maybe I should talk to him."

Jobin listened to the soft, muted sounds of their lovemaking for well over the next hour. *That's it. Wear him out*, he thought, as Rhyden gasped Aigiarn's name softly, over and over, his voice growing breathless and insistent. *He is exhausted already -- wear him out all the more. Make him sleep like the dead, so even his rotted Elf hearing will not rouse him.*

After what felt like an eternity to Jobin, silence at last fell upon their tent. Jobin moved, rising onto his knees and creeping toward the tent flap. He peeked outside, looking about. He could see the silhouetted outlines of men sitting around the campfire ahead of him. There were several tents set up between him and the blaze, and Jobin felt confident he could sneak about in the shadows without drawing any undue notice.

He turned his head, looking through the shadows toward the silhouette of Rhyden's tent. *Both of us bloody well whipped by women*, he thought, and snickered

softly. If he did not laugh, he would probably burst out weeping, and so he forced a crazed grin on his face and a guffaw between his clenched teeth. *At least you are getting a piece of ass. Me -- I got vomit in my mouth, something crawling about in my skull.*

"You got the better deal, you bastard," Jobin whispered, managing another giggle. He crawled toward the tent, glancing over his shoulder to make sure none of the Oirat around the fire saw him. He paused outside of Rhyden's tent flap, drawing it slowly aside, his breath stilled in his throat.

Do not wake up, he thought, staring through the darkness at Rhyden's sleeping form. *Do not hear me, you rot. Be exhausted...be asleep. Do not wake up.*

He fell still as Rhyden moaned in his sleep, moving his hand, shrugging his shoulder slightly beneath the blankets. *Please just let him sleep*, Jobin thought, his eyes enormous as he offered a silent implore to the Good Mother. He had never been particularly devout when the matter came to religion, but at the moment, Jobin was desperate and willing to resort to anything. *Please, I am begging you. I cannot take this, not another night, not another bloody damn day...this thing that is inside of me. Please just let him sleep. Let me take the bloody sword and get out of here -- let me get this bloody damn rot out of me before it drives me mad.*

Rhyden's breath issued in a long, exhausted sigh. He snuggled closer to Aigiarn, tucking his face against her hair, her shoulder and then he was still and quiet. Jobin nearly whimpered aloud in relief. *Thank you*, he thought, closing his eyes and granting the Good Mother a quick, grateful nod. *Thank you, thank you...whatever you want from me -- no more liquor, no more swearing, no more whores or brawling -- I give it gladly. It is yours. Just keep him sleeping.*

He glanced to his left and found Rhyden's clothes in a heap by the tent threshold. He hooked his fingertips against the flap of the Elf's heavy, fur lined hide robe and lifted it slowly, deliberately. He found Rhyden's leggings crumpled beneath, and atop the pants, the long woolen sash he wore as a belt. The pouch rested on its side, fettered by thin straps of sinew to the sash. Jobin set the robe aside and leaned further into the tent, working swiftly, silently to untie the bag. As the loops of cord slackened and fell free, he snatched the pouch in hand. He paused before ducking out of the tent, spying

something else of interest that had been lying underneath the hide bag. It was Rhyden's knife, an elongated, narrow blade with an elaborately carved bone handle. Ordinarily, Jobin might have eyed the knife as something worth a haggle at a pawn shop. On that night, however, he looked at it only as a weapon -- something he did not have, and could certainly use.

He grabbed the hilt of the knife and drew it free from its leather scabbard. He scuttled backward out of the tent, letting the flap of wool fall closed behind him. He scurried, crouched among the shadows close to the ground behind Rhyden's tent and then knelt again, setting aside the knife and jerking open the top of the pouch. He rifled hurriedly about inside, frowning as he tossed aside the useless junk Rhyden carried about with him -- packets of poultices; what looked to be some sort of primitive sewing kit; more of that nasty salted meat and dried legumes that passed for food among the Oirat. He had one, heart-shuddering, horrifying moment when he thought the sword hilt was gone, that Rhyden had sensed his intentions somehow and hidden it -- or that damn rot kid, Temuchin had taken it. Tears welled in his eyes, and his breath tangled. "No...no, please..." he had whispered, and then he had laughed aloud, his voice tremulous and someone manic as his fingers fumbled against the polished silver at the bottom of the bag. He pulled the hilt out and stared at it, hiccupping against tears.

"Thank you," he whispered to the Good Mother again. He closed his hand around the hilt and when his fingertips coiled to meet his thumb, he uttered a sharp, breathless squeal of fright as a spear of pale light suddenly appeared before him.

It flickered and waned between fire and darkness, like the feeble illumination of a candle caught in the wind. It was a dim glow, like moonlight diffused through clouds, a peculiar, and iridescent green color. Jobin opened his hand as he recoiled in reflexive start; the green light winked and was gone as the sword hilt dropped to the ground.

Jobin blinked down at it, his mouth agape, his eyes wide. *What in the duchan...?* he thought, trembling with fright. *Hoah, Sweet Mother, what in the bloody duchan was that?*

He reached for the hilt, his hand trembling uncontrollably. As his hand closed around it, the fluttering, faint beam of green light appeared again. He realized it was not fading in and out, like a flame against a breeze. Rather, a thick, smoky vein of darkness

seemed to swirl about it, consuming it for fleeting moments before momentarily yielding again. Jobin loosened his fingers; when the hilt tumbled to the ground, again, the strange blade vanished.

“What in the duchan?” Jobin breathed, his fright fading into wonder. He lifted the sword again, marveling over the dancing complement of light and shadow that appeared above the tang. *Draiocht*, he told himself. *It is some kind of magic sword -- Elf magic. I will be damned -- Nimon Hodder was right all along. Rhyden Fabhcun does know Elf magic. Here is the proof in my hand!*

Rhyden Fabhcun carries a sword with him, Mongoljin had told him, and all at once, as her words echoed in his mind, that slithering sensation inside of him stirred again, making him shudder. *A very special sword.*

“Very special indeed,” Jobin whispered. He dropped the sword hilt again, and wiped his palm against the breast of his robe, as if he had touched something soiled. He pinched the hilt between his fingertips and lifted it; if he did not close his hand all of the way around it, the glowing green blade did not appear. He raised his hips, tucking the hilt beneath the strap of his belt, tucking it behind the overlapping layer of his double-breasted robe. He took the bone-handled knife in hand and rose to his feet, glancing in the direction of the campfire again.

No one had taken notice of him, just as he had hoped. Jobin turned, clutching the knife in his fist and pressing his other hand against the slight lump beneath the cover of his robe to hold the sword hilt in place. The Khahl were not far behind them and he could reach them by daybreak if he did not pause long during the night. He could follow the riverbank, letting the meandering channel of the Okin lead him back to them -- back to Mongoljin.

Jobin started to run, his breath frosting the air in a dim haze. *I am coming, you bitch*, he thought. *I am coming, and I have your bloody damn sword.*

He did not know what Mongoljin wanted with Rhyden’s magic Elfin sword, nor did he particularly care. He only wanted her to let him go free, to take whatever insidious ichor she had retched into his body away from him and to leave him alone.

I am coming, he thought again, his feet pounding against the sodden mud of the shoreline. *I have kept my word to you, Mongoljin -- now you are going to keep yours.*

Chapter Two

Temu lay on his side facing the fire, trying to let the gentle rhythm of Yeb's ceremonial drum beats lull him to sleep. There was a certain, soothing sound to the baritone measures; Yeb used the drum for his ritual of ibegel, meant to keep spirits away from the Oirat camp. Temu should have found some comfort in this, but that night, he did not. He rested with his eyes closed, feeling the bitter cold of the night against his back, the blazing heat from the campfire against his face, and he waited.

He did not know what he was waiting for, but he knew that it was coming. He had felt it all day, rising within him, a restless sort of anxiety; a quiet gnawing in the pit of his stomach. Something was going to happen. All he could do was wait for it to come.

He heard quiet footsteps approach the fire; gutal soles crunching against the pebbled, frost-covered ground, and the sound of Yeb's drum fell still. "Oroin mend, bahadur," Yeb said, and Temu knew that Toghrol had joined them, returning from the Abhacan tunnel.

"Oroin mend, bugu Yeb," Toghrol said, his voice quiet and weary. Temu heard the rustle of his clothing as he lowered himself to the ground, sitting with his legs tucked beneath him. He felt Toghrol's gloved hand drape gently, briefly against the side of his head, stroking his hair.

"Any progress?" Yeb asked.

"Not much," Toghrol replied. He sighed heavily. "The rubble is unstable. We move the larger pieces from one place, and everything above it collapses. One step forward, eleven backward. Inalchi was nearly crushed earlier beneath a fall. I managed to grab him, jerk him back but he was still banged up some, cut and battered."

"You should have called for me." Yeb asked. "I would have -- "

"Rhyden tended to him," Toghrol said. Ever since the incident at the Urlug River, when Rhyden had hauled Toghrol from beneath the raging water, Toghrol had referred to him by his name instead of "the Elf," as had been his habit. Temu understood what a concession this was within Toghrol's heart, and he smiled.

“He is a good healer,” Toghrul said. “He told me he is considered a warrior among his people. That among the Elves, he was cast, he said, named by their goddess to be a warrior. I do not understand that. He seems to have such a gift for healing. Did his goddess not realize this?”

“No destiny is carved in granite,” Yeb said. “Perhaps Rhyden’s heart has simply led him in other directions.”

“He has done more than his fair share in the tunnel,” Toghrul said quietly. “He was staggering with exhaustion, but he kept coming back for a new load to haul. Juchin and I could not convince him to leave. He told us his people heal fast. He could work harder because any damage to him would be gone in a day or two. I do not understand him.”

This was Toghrul’s round-about way of admitting, *I was wrong about him*. Temu knew it and so did Yeb.

“It sounds to me as if you understand him fairly well, bahadur,” Yeb said.

“He saved my life, bugu Yeb,” Toghrul said softly. “I do not know that I would have done the same for him. He is a better man than me.”

“He is a man, Toghrul,” Yeb said. “Just as you; just as me. The Tengri have given us our own amis with which to think, our own sunis with which to feel. One pair is not better than another. They are each unique and meant to be.”

“He gives something to Aigiarn that I cannot,” Toghrul said. “Something I know I could never give to her. That light in her eyes, the hope she had when she was with Yesugei. It is there again. He gives that to her.” He uttered a soft laugh that was filled with more regret than humor. “I suppose I should be grateful for the time that I had with her.”

“You speak as though your time with her is over,” Yeb said.

“Is it not?” Toghrul asked.

“Maybe you simply needed to realize that you were both meant to be something else to one another,” Yeb said. “Something that was not forced, or painful. She will always have need of you, Toghrul. Sometimes what seems to be an ending, is really a beginning in disguise.”

Toghrul laughed again after a moment, a lighter sound this time. “How did you come to be so wise, bugu Yeb?”

“I like to think that I was born this way,” Yeb replied, and Toghrul laughed again.

He stretched out on the ground behind Temu, draping his arm over the boy and drawing his blankets more snugly beneath his chin. “Rhyden would be a good father to Temu,” he whispered.

“Temu already has a good father, bahadur,” Yeb told him gently. “Who has always protected him, provided for him and loved him as much as any son he might have sired.”

“Yes,” Toghrul replied. “He has had you and me, Yeb.”

“And now he has Rhyden, too,” Yeb remarked. “A child could do far worse, I say, than to have so many who care so much about him.”

Their conversation faded. Temu listened to the soft sounds of Toghrul’s breaths as they grew long and deep with exhausted sleep. The cold against his back was gone; Toghrul sheltered him from it with his body. Temu snuggled back against him, feeling Toghrul’s arm tighten gently, reflexively about him, and feeling safe in this comforting cocoon of warmth, Temu dozed.

He did not know how long he slept. He only knew that he awoke abruptly and in full, his eyes flying open wide when he heard a voice within his mind.

It is time.

Temu blinked across the fire and saw Trejaeran sitting there, smiling at him. His legs were folded beneath him, his hands draped against his knees, as though he had been patiently waiting for Temu to rouse.

“Trejaeran?” Temu whispered, pushing his hand against the ground, raising his head and shoulders. Toghrul groaned from behind him, but did not stir.

Beannacht, Temu, Trejaeran said. Are you ready? It is time.

“Time...?” Temu asked, bewildered. “Time for what?”

Trejaeran rose to his feet. He walked around the perimeter of the fire, passing by Oirat Kelet who sat engaged in quiet conversations, oblivious to his presence. He motioned to Temu, wagging his fingertips in beckon, and then he walked away from the fire.

Temu crawled out from beneath Toghrul's arm, and the heavy layers of his blankets. He followed Trejaeran, puzzled. "Where are we going?" he asked. "What is it time for?"

Trejaeran glanced at him over his shoulder and pressed his forefinger against his lips. *Ciunas*, he said. He spoke in Gaeilgen, Rhyden's native tongue, but Temu understood; it was translated nearly instinctively in his mind. *Hush*, Trejaeran had told him.

Your mind, not your mouth, Temu, Trejaeran said with a smile. *This is not the jabsar. The others can still hear you.*

It is not the jabsar? Temu asked, startled. He turned around and found the Kelet by the fire had all fallen silent to look at him, their expressions curious.

"Are you alright, Temu?" one of them asked.

"I..." Temu blinked at the Kelet. "I...yes, I...I am fine. A dream, that is all. I have to relieve myself."

He realized for the first time that Yeb was gone. He had left the fireside, abandoning his ceremonial drum to mark the place where he had been seated. "Where is Yeb?"

The Kelet smiled at him. "He left only a moment ago," he said. "The same reason as you, I think. Be careful, Temu. Do not wander too far."

"I will not," Temu replied. He turned again and fell in step with Trejaeran. *Where are you taking me?*

Into the tunnel, Trejaeran said. *Do not be frightened. It is alright.*

Does Rhyden know you are here? Temu asked.

The corner of Trejaeran's mouth hooked somewhat. *Rhyden is sleeping. He had...other things on his mind tonight. I did not want to bother him*, he said, cryptic comments Temu did not understand.

Temu paused at the bottom of the stairwell leading up to the portico of Heese. Trejaeran climbed the steps, turning to look at him once he had reached the top. *I am not supposed to go in there yet*, Temu said, glancing uncertainly over his shoulder. *Mamma said so. She said it is dangerous. I have to wait until they clear the tunnel.*

It is alright, Trejaeran said, and he held out his hand in beckon. *She does not understand. You can come with me.*

Temu started hesitantly up the stairs, frowning slightly at Trejaeran. *Does not understand what?*

What is supposed to happen, Trejaeran replied, smiling.

Temu reached the top of the stairs and stood beside Trejaeran beneath the eave of the portico ceiling. *What is supposed to happen, Trejaeran?*

Trejaeran dropped him a wink. *You will see*, he said, and he walked toward the doorway. *Come on.*

Temu followed him beyond the threshold and into the tunnel. Temu had not brought a torch, but as they stepped into the dark corridor, he realized he did not need one. Trejaeran was glowing, a dim blue light emanating from his entire form. He looked translucent in the glow; Temu could see through him, the shadow-draped hints of the relief sculptures on the walls beyond his form.

Does it hurt? Temu asked, drawing Trejaeran's gaze. *Does it hurt to be dead?*

Trejaeran laughed. *Not usually*, he replied.

They followed the tunnel all of the way to the end, where the iron gate had collapsed. As they neared the corner approaching the gated threshold, Temu could see the fluttering, golden illumination of torchlight on the wall. He could hear the sounds of the men working, grunting and calling out to one another. He could hear bergelmirs groaning in protest under the weight of loads harnessed to their backs in broad slings. He could hear the scraping and clattering of tools against stone and thick earth.

They will see me, he said to Trejaeran. *They will tell Mamma I was here.*

It is alright, Trejaeran said again.

As they rounded the corner, Trejaeran saw twenty Oirat hard at work. A bergelmir loaded with a cargo of broken granite and dirt lumbered slowly past him, grumbling in complaint while an Uru'ut walked along behind it, calling to it in encouragement. Temu stepped back, pressing himself against the wall. The Uru'ut glanced at him as he passed, but seemed to think nothing unusual of the boy's presence. He turned back to the weasel and snapped at it again, flicking it in the rump with a long stick to prod it forward.

There is Juchin! Temu said, alarmed as they came to stop behind a pile of rubble. He saw the Uru'ut leader ahead of them by the gate, clapping his hands together and shouting to his men as he helped them wrestle a sling filled with rocks. Juchin had been in the tunnels since well before sundown; despite the freezing temperature, he had stripped off his del and stood bare-chested and sweat-soaked as he worked. When a section of the piled debris suddenly crumpled, small rocks and clouds of earth spilling down the sloping side, Juchin danced backwards, calling sharply to the others in warning. Temu drew back behind the rubble, lest Juchin turn around and see him. *He will tell, even if the others will not. He knows I am not supposed to be here.*

Trejaeran only smiled at him again. *It is alright, he said. I promise, Temu.*

He genuflected before Temu and placed his hand against Temu's shoulder. There was no weight at his touch, no pressure or friction. It was as though smoke settled against Temu's form, and Temu blinked at him.

"It is my fault," he whispered. "Why you cannot come here in full. Why Rhyden and Yeb cannot sense things with their hiimori...why you and Ogotai cannot reach them. This shroud Yeb talks about...it is me, is it not? I made it happen."

Trejaeran nodded. *You did it to protect them, he said. You did it to keep them safe.*

"How did I do it?" Temu said. "I do not understand. My hiimori is not that strong -- not stronger than Yeb's, or Rhyden's."

It is different than theirs, Trejaeran said. You are different, Temuchin. You know this in your heart. You have felt it all along.

Temu's eyes swam with sudden tears. "It has always been me. My visions...the things no one else can see. It has never been my father showing them to me. It has always been just me."

Trejaeran cupped his palm against Temu's cheek, and Temu felt dim heat, like the warmth of a sunbeam against his skin. *Your father has always been with you, he said. And he always will be, Temu.*

He smiled at Temu. *Your power is growing. I know you have felt this, too.*

"I cannot make it stop," Temu whispered. "I drove Nala away from the camp. When she got beyond the shroud I made, Mongoljin killed her. I kept Rhyden from sensing his friend, Aedhir. He is dead because of me, too."

Is he? Trejaeran asked, the corner of his mouth hooking mysteriously again. Temu blinked at him, bewildered, but before he could even draw breath to speak, Trejaeran rose to his feet and looked beyond the rubble pile, toward the gate.

They will not get through it in time, he said, his smile fading, his expression growing solemn. *The Khahl have stopped for the night, but they will come again in the morning. They will know you are vulnerable.*

How? Temu asked.

Trejaeran glanced at him. *You know how. You have felt it.*

"Jobin Dunster," Temu whispered, stricken. "The shadow I see around him -- it is Mongoljin, is it not? She is using him somehow to sneak among us, to slip through the shroud. I cannot sense what he is thinking, like I can with everyone else. She is preventing me, is she not? She has done something to him."

She has filled him with the waters of Tengriss, Trejaeran said. *It is in him now. She is in him now.*

"But why? What does she want?"

I do not know, Trejaeran said, frowning. *I cannot look into his mind, either. But I know Mongoljin has grown stronger. Much stronger. I think she is absorbing the hiimori from others -- from the Khahl shamans, from Nala. With every one she consumes, she grows stronger.*

"Consumes?" Temu whimpered, his eyes widening in horror.

She is stronger than me now, Trejaeran said. He looked at Temu gravely. *When she learns your people have stopped here to dig through the rubble, she will come for you. She will take you and try to force you to open the dragons' lair for her. She will know I cannot stop her.* Trejaeran turned toward the gate, watching the Kelet work. *You have to help them, Temu.*

"What?" Temu asked, blinking. "Me...? But I cannot..."

Look at the rubble, Temu, Trejaeran said. When Temu continued to simply stare at him, confused, Trejaeran nodded toward Juchin and the Kelet. *Look at it, Temu.*

Temu turned, leaning out over the debris toward the listing gate. Another bergemir had been loaded and was being guided out of the tunnel. He watched Juchin bend over at the waist, pressing his palms against his thighs, huffing wearily for breath.

Focus your mind on the earth and stone, Trejaeran told him, and Temu looked beyond Juchin at the rubble. *Point your mind toward it, and do not let it waver. It is very heavy, and very thick. You have to concentrate.*

“To do what?” Temu whispered.

To move it, Trejaeran said. When Temu looked at him, startled, Trejaeran pointed to the mound again. *Look at it, not at me. You have to look at it, concentrate on it. Trust me.*

Temu took a hedging step backward, shaking his head. “No,” he whispered. “No, Trejaeran, I...” Rhyden had told him that Trejaeran had been able to move things just by thinking about them -- like the dragons had. “I cannot do that. Not like you. I cannot.”

You are earth and sky, Temu, Trejaeran said. *The spirit of Ag’iamon is within you, just as he promised. You have his strength, his power. That is what stirs within you. You are the Negh.*

“I cannot move things with my mind.”

Trejaeran smiled. *How do you know?* he asked. *You have not even tried.*

Temu turned his gaze hesitantly toward the rubble. He stared at it, his brows narrowing, his lips pressing together in a line of concentration. Nothing happened and he glanced at Trejaeran, his brows lifted in implore. *You see? I cannot. I just tried. Nothing happened.*

Trejaeran raised his brow. *There was hardly effort*, he said. *Concentrate, Temu. Open your mind in full. Focus all of your energy on it.*

Temu looked at him dubiously, but turned again. He frowned at the rubble and opened his mind, just as he would when the thoughts of others would come to him. He stared at the rubble and closed his hands into fists. His brows narrowed as he centered his mind, feeling the energy within him -- this power of Ag’iamon’s, as Trejaeran called it -- focusing within him. He clenched his fingers so tightly against his palm that his hands trembled, but he did not notice. He focused his attention on the pile of rubble; he focused his energy, concentrating it within him.

Maith thu, Trejaeran told him softly. *Very good. Now push it away from you, Temu. Shove it with all of your might. Drive it out of you.*

Temu thought of pushing, shoving mightily, and he convulsed, staggering back as he felt this simmering well of energy tear away from him. He gasped in startled fright, tripping over his own feet and falling onto his rump. He heard the skittering sound of falling rocks and Juchin crying out in sharp alarm. Temu scrambled to his feet, looking toward the gate.

He watched a large section of debris tumble down from the top of the heap. It rushed toward the ground, falling away from the gate. Temu felt the ground shiver beneath his gut as the massive load of dirt and rocks smashed against the floor. A thick cloud of dust filled the tunnel and the Kelet stumbled away, throwing their hands toward their faces as they whooped and choked for breath.

“It worked!” he exclaimed, whirling to Trejaeran, sputtering against the haze of silt. He grinned broadly. “I did it, Trejaeran! It worked!”

Trejaeran tapped his fingertip against his mouth again in a hushing gesture, but he was smiling at Temu, pleased and proud. *Maith thu*, he said. *Try again, Temu.*

The dust had begun to settle and the Oirat stumbled about, coughing. Temu looked toward the rubble pile and focused again, the smile fading from his face as his expression grew stern with concentration.

Push it, Trejaeran told him. *It will move if you make it. Shove it all aside.*

Temu’s breath stilled in his throat. He closed his eyes, his hands tightening into fists again. *Move*, he thought, seeing the rubble in his mind, picturing it clearly as though he looked right at it. He could feel that tremulous, anxious energy rising within him again, shuddering through him. *Move*.

The floor beneath him trembled. He felt something spatter against the cap of his head and he opened his eyes, looking down at his feet. He saw tiny granules of rock smack against the ground, raining down from above him. The floor shook harder, and he heard a low groan as the walls began to shiver.

Move, he thought, closing his eyes tighter, his brows furrowed deeply. *Move*.

He heard the cracking of stone riving, and Juchin shouted out in bright alarm. “It is an earth tremor! Back! Everyone get back outside!”

The floor bucked beneath Temu, like a bergemir unaccustomed to a saddle. His eyes flew open as he stumbled sideways. The air filled again with dense, smothering silt as a thunderous roar wrenched through the tunnel. The Kelet cried out over the din, their voices overlapping with fright as they ran through the cloud of dust, rushing down the corridor for the exit. Temu caught a glimpse of something enormous moving in the gloom, some sort of silhouetted shadow crashing toward the ground, and then the floor shook again as another tremendous boom tore across the corridor. Temu staggered, sprawling onto his side on the floor. He heard Kelet running past him, their feet pounding on the ground as they cried out in bright terror. He felt more rocks pelting his head and shoulders, a heavier fall this time as the ceiling began to crumble, and he cried out, throwing his hands over his head and scuttling toward the wall. He crouched there, his shoulder and cheek shoved against the stone as the entire Bith surged and heaved beneath him. The mountains had come alive and the mound of rubble had not just yielded at Temu's command; Ondur Dobu itself had moved by his will, and as it did, the Abhacan tunnel collapsed around him.

"Trejaeran!" he cried, terrified.

After a long moment, silence fell upon the tunnel. The ground became still, and there was no sound except for the soft, hissing spatter of dust and grit hitting the floor. Temu opened his eyes, lowering his hands warily from his face. He tasted dirt in his mouth, caked against his lips, his nostrils and he shook his head, spitting.

"Trejaeran?" he croaked. He rose to his feet, stumbling clumsily. The tunnel was dimly aglow with muted light from abandoned torches, but he could not see anything. The dust was still too thick in the air. He stepped forward blindly, hesitantly, his hands outstretched, pawing at the open air. He felt his gutal kick lightly against something in front of him, broken chunks of rock that had not been there before. He staggered, floundering over the debris.

Oh, no, he thought in dismay. I pushed too hard. I caved in the tunnel. I am trapped here now, and I buried the gate all the more!

"Trejaeran, where are you?" he cried, blinking against the sting of tears and silt. "Please, I am sorry! I did not mean it!"

He struck another toppled pile of stones and went sprawling to the floor, barking his knees painfully, his chin smacking hard against the dirt. He sat up, whimpering, tears streaking through the grime on his face. He tasted blood in his mouth, felt it leaking slowly from his nose. "Trejaeran?" he pleaded. "Trejaeran, please! Where are you?"

The dust ahead of him parted slightly, thinning and swirling slightly. Temu frowned, drawing his legs beneath him, wincing as he stumbled to his feet. The haze was moving, as if it had caught a current of air, and it began to wane. As it dissipated, he could see a patch of looming darkness through it; a broad, shadow-filled opening and he gasped softly, realizing. *The gate...!*

He moved forward, using his hands to bat the dust away from him. He could see it now; the mound of rubble in front of the gate was gone. It looked as though an enormous fist had smashed through it, battering aside the tons of earth and rocks. The rubble was gone, and he could see the opening beneath the lip of the gate beyond it. More than this, however, he could see that the enormous gate itself -- fifteen feet high, at least twenty across and more than three feet thick -- had been smashed loose of whatever remained of its moorings. It had been thrown backward with such tremendous force that the stone doorway, grooved with deep channels to hold it in place had crumpled like dried leaves. The gate had plowed through the mountainous rubble behind it, cleaving a deep trough through the rocks, and had landed some thirty-five feet beyond its threshold. The entrance to Heese stood open wide and gaping.

"Bugger me!" Temu gasped.

"That was very good," he heard Trejaeran say from behind him, and he whirled around, startled.

"Trejaeran!" he cried. "Where did you go? Look -- I did it! I did it!"

Trejaeran looked at the smashed threshold, his brow raised appreciatively. "I should say you did," he said. "You pushed the rocks out of the way, the gate...even me." He turned to Temu and smiled. "You knocked me clear into the jabsar with that one."

Temu blinked at him. "What?"

“You are very strong, Temu,” Trejaeran told him. “Your mind is like a force of nature. I have never sensed anyone like you.”

“But I...” Temu said. “I did not mean to, Trejaeran. I would never...”

“I know, Temu,” Trejaeran said with a smile. It faded abruptly from his face and he turned, looking back down the corridor, his brows drawing together.

“What is it?” Temu asked. “Trejaeran, what is -- ” Trejaeran held up his hand and the boy fell obligingly silent. He watched Trejaeran close his eyes and lift his chin slightly, like a wolf sniffing the wind.

The shroud is gone, Trejaeran said, opening his eyes, his mouth turning down in a frown. There was fear in his blue eyes; bright and sudden alarm, and Temu saw it plainly. *I have to go now.*

“What?” Temu asked. “No, Trejaeran, please, I am sorry. I did not mean -- ”

“It is not you, lad,” Trejaeran said, and when he looked at Temu, his expression softened. He placed his hand against Temu’s shoulder. *You will be weak*, he said. *You expended a lot of energy. Do not follow me. Go back to the camp and get some sleep.*

“But...but I...” Temu began.

“Promise me, Temuchin,” Trejaeran said. “Promise you will not follow me.”

“Alright,” Temu whispered.

Trejaeran nodded once, satisfied. “Maith thu,” he said. *Very good.* He turned toward the tunnel again. “Excuse me, le do thoil.” *Please.*

He disappeared. His body seemed to dissolve into dozens of glowing, dancing globules of pale blue light, and then he was gone. Temu stood alone in the crumbled ruins of the corridor, his shadow fluttering against the rubble and cracked earth beneath him in feeble torchlight.

He thought of the fear in Trejaeran’s eyes and shivered, drawing his arms about himself. *What were you afraid of?* he thought. *What happened? What did I do?*

The shroud is gone, Trejaeran had told him, and he gasped softly in dismay. Had he done this somehow? He remembered in the jabsar that Mongoljin had weakened when she tried to use her hiimori against Rhyden and Temu simultaneously. When she had turned her attention to one of them, her hold on the other had loosened. If he had been the one creating the shroud all the while, and had focused all of his energy on

moving the rubble, battering aside the gate, had he inadvertently destroyed the manang he had built to keep the Oirat shielded from Mongoljin and the Khahl?

She is stronger than me now, Trejaeran had said. When she learns your people have stopped here to dig through the rubble, she will come for you. She will take you and try to force you to open the dragons' lair for her. She will know I cannot stop her.

Temu opened his mind, searching for Trejaeran. He had promised he would not follow, but that was before he had realized to his horror where Trejaeran had gone -- and why.

If the shroud fell, she would have sensed it, he thought. She would try to attack us. He has gone to fight her, to try and stop her!

As his hiimori stretched wide, he felt Trejaeran's presence somewhere near the camp. He could sense the blue glow of Trejaeran's gerel against the dark backdrop of his mind. Trejaeran had gone down to the water's edge, along the shoreline of the Okin River. The moment he sensed Trejaeran, Temu realized he was not alone.

"Mongoljin!" he whimpered as a sudden presence slithered across his mind; a black shadow of gerel, something icy and crawling, like the fingertips of a dead woman scratching and groping for purchase.

There was someone else, too -- someone who was known to Temu, and whose red gerel smoldered dimly, as though the life force that sustained it waned. "Yeb!"

He began to run, racing around scattered debris and fallen stone, running for the portico. "Yeb!" he cried again, his voice shrill with frantic alarm as he rushed across the threshold and out into the open air once more. He bolted down the stairs, his gutal soles skittering for purchase as he hit the graveled ground running. He stumbled, regained his footing and ran once more, screaming breathlessly as he headed for the riverbank. "Yeb! Yeb!"

Yeb had remained quietly seated before the campfire long after Toghrol had fallen asleep beside him. The Uru'ut Kelet gathered nearby chatted in quiet conversations together, either preparing for their shift in the tunnel, or having only just returned, weary and winded from their labor. Yeb's ceremonial drum lay still and quiet

on the ground in front of him; he had not resumed the ibegel ritual for the night. It was not habit for him to abandon his ceremonies so readily, but he was distracted.

He looked beyond the fire toward the silhouetted tents framing the campsite. Most specifically, he looked at the shadowed outline of Jobin Dunster's tent. The man had ducked inside before the sun had even set. With Rhyden working to clear the fortified gate free of rubble, Jobin had seemed decidedly uncomfortable alone among the Oirat. He had retreated beneath the flaps of wool, and had not emerged since.

Temu did not like or trust Jobin Dunster. It did not take hiimori to see this plainly in the boy's face. There was something about the man that deeply troubled and disturbed the boy. Yeb trusted Temu's intuitions. He could not sense anything about Jobin with his hiimori stifled, but he had come to suspect that not only was Temu's power not hindered by the manang that had come over him, it had grown in spite of it. He also believed that Temu was somehow inadvertently creating the manang in the inherent hope that it would keep those he loved -- Aigiarn, Rhyden, Toghrul, Yeb and Juchin in particular -- safe from harm. In a matter of speaking, it had; Yeb had told Aigiarn that he thought the shroud had protected those it meant to keep safe from the whitewater of the Urlug when the knars had been destroyed.

Temu did not trust Jobin Dunster, and Yeb was wise enough to realize whomever merited Temuchin's mistrust was someone worthy of suspicion and doubt. Though he had kept a careful eye on Jobin, he had been outwardly nice to the man, making every cordial effort and attempt to be friendly with him, more so to spare Rhyden discomfort or distress than Jobin. Whatever it was about the man that bothered Temu, like Yeb, Rhyden did not sense it. He saw only someone from his homeland when he looked at Jobin, someone who was his friend, if only through more fond associations.

When Jobin poked his head out of the tent, looking warily around, Yeb raised his brow slightly. His proximity to the fire kept his interest in Jobin hidden. He would have been no more than a silhouette behind the flames from Jobin's point of view.

Yeb watched Jobin crawl out of his tent. He scuttled quickly into the shadows, nearly blending in with them. If Yeb had not seen him leave, if he had not followed the man's quick movement with his eyes, he might have missed him now among the camouflage of darkness. Jobin crept on his hands and knees toward Rhyden's tent. He

drew the flap of the tent aside and then glanced uncertainly over his shoulder. Satisfied that he was unobserved, Jobin leaned forward, his head and shoulders disappearing into the tent.

What are you doing? Yeb thought, frowning. He rose slowly to his feet and began to walk along the edge of the fire's glow. When Jobin scuttled out of the tent clutching something between his hands, Yeb saw a wink of dim firelight off of steel, and his frown deepened.

He took Rhyden's knife, he thought. *Rhyden's or Aigiarn's -- he took it.*

Jobin had leaned into the tent long enough to do harm with a blade in hand. Yeb's footsteps quickened and his hands closed into fists. He did not know why Jobin might have wanted to hurt Aigiarn or Rhyden, but since he had no idea why Jobin would have been in their tent in the first place, he was taking no chances.

Jobin had ducked into the shadows beyond the tent. Yeb crouched by the threshold, drawing the flap roughly aside as he leaned inside, his brows narrowed with concern, his breath stilled in anxious trepidation in his throat. He breathed an audible sigh of relief, tension draining from his shoulders when he found Aigiarn and Rhyden asleep -- and unharmed -- inside. Rhyden lay spooned against Aigiarn, his forehead tucked against her shoulder, his arm draped over her waist. Aigiarn's long, dark hair was unfettered, spilled about her head in a heavy tumble. She was naked. Yeb could see her bare shoulder, the graceful length of her exposed neck above the edge of her blankets.

Aigiarn stirred, roused by the sudden cold draft of air Yeb had allowed into the tent. Her legs moved beneath the blankets, and she groaned softly, raising her head from the pallet. Her hair draped into her face, and she shoved it back, her brows drawn slightly in groggy confusion.

"What...?" she croaked. "What is it?"

She had been sleeping deeply, and was still more asleep than awake. The blankets fell along her bosom; she held them modestly in place beneath her arms, clutching at them with her hand. Rhyden, who had exhausted himself working in the tunnel, did not rouse at all. His hand slipped limply against her as she sat up, drooping into her lap.

Yeb smiled gently at Aigiarn. Even now, in this disheveled state, with her hair askew, her eyes sleepily lidded, he found her beautiful. Even now, as she roused from the arms of a young man Yeb had grown to consider his dear friend, her body still weary from having made love to him, Yeb loved Aigiarn and -- to his shame -- longed for her.

"It is alright," he told her.

Aigiarn blinked dazedly at him. "Yeb?" she whispered, her fingertips fumbling against her face as she rubbed at her eyes. "Are you...is...is everything alright? Is Temu alright?"

"Yes, Aigiarn," he said, still smiling. He leaned forward, brushing a wayward strand of hair back from her cheek. "I am sorry to have disturbed you. Go back to sleep. Oroin mend." *Good night,*

"You did not disturb me," she said. "Oroin mend, Yeb." She smiled softly as her eyelids fluttered closed and she settled back onto her side beneath the blankets. "I love you," she murmured, her voice fading as her mind faded into sleep again.

Yeb watched her sleep for a long, fond moment, her hand draped against Rhyden's, the curves and contours of her limbs and form nestled against his. Yeb ducked his head and stepped back, letting the tent flap fall closed behind him. "I love you, too," he whispered, brushing his fingertips against the wool.

He stood, keeping his shoulders hunched, using the tent for cover. He narrowed his brows, staring off in the direction he had seen Jobin scamper. He could hear the soft, rapid patter of footsteps; someone running away from the camp toward the river's edge, and Yeb followed, his gutal falling swiftly, quietly against the ground.

He paused as he stepped on something that crunched beneath his sole. He squatted and saw the ground littered with discarded medicinal packets; herbs and poultices pressed between squares of hide. He frowned. Here was an Oirat sewing kit, and there, a few scraps of dried burlagh meat. He took a couple of small steps forward and found a bogcu pouch discarded on the ground. Yeb lifted it in hand, his frown deepening. *This is Rhyden's,* he thought. *Why would Jobin take his bogcu only to toss it aside, along with all of its supplies?*

His eyes flew wide and he gasped softly, realizing. "Tengerii boshig," he whispered, jerking the bogcu bag open and thrusting his hand inside. The pouch was empty, and he knew what Jobin had been after. *The anam'cladh.*

Mongoljin knew of the sword. Rhyden had run her through with its fiery blade. She knew what it was, and what it could do. Yeb had suspected that as much as Temu's manang, it was Mongoljin's own fear of the sword -- and another encounter with its blade -- that had kept her away from them for so long.

Until now, he thought, dismayed. She must have known Rhyden would trust Jobin. Even if the rest of us did not, Rhyden would and he would welcome him among us, that his trust would make him vulnerable.

Yeb began to run after Jobin, following the man's path toward the water. He did not know what would happen if Mongoljin claimed the anam'cladh, but he was terrified nonetheless. It was the most powerful weapon they possessed, and besides Trejaeran, the only real hope they had against her. If Mongoljin could command the power of its blade like Rhyden and Temu had, she could stand against even Trejaeran's might. She could destroy them.

He heard Jobin ahead of him, his boots splashing in the shallows of the river, pounding against the muddy bank as he followed the shoreline. Yeb did not need hiimori to tell him where Jobin was going -- east to rejoin the Khahl. He was going back to Mongoljin.

"You cannot have it," he hissed. "I will not let you."

Chapter Three

Yeb caught sight of Jobin ahead of him, a shadow ducking and darting among shadows. The man had tromped and stumbled across the shallows of the Okin to the far side of the river, and now lumbered along the shoreline. He staggered along, keeping one arm about his midriff, clutching at the dagger with the other hand. He was no more than thirty feet ahead of Yeb, marking a clumsy, frantic pace, and when he paused, leaning against the sloping face of a cliffside, his shoulders heaving as he huffed for breath, Yeb slowed, walking toward him.

"I cannot let you take it to her," Yeb said, and Jobin whirled at the sound of his voice, his eyes flown wide with terrified surprise. He uttered a breathless squeal when he saw the shaman approaching, and he scrambled back, shoving the knife at Yeb.

"Keep away from me!" he cried.

Yeb did not slow his pace. He held his gaze evenly with Jobin's and continued to walk toward him, holding out his hand. "Give me the anam'cladh."

Jobin blinked at him, shocked and bewildered. He stumbled back again, swinging the dagger in a broad, clumsy arc. "I said keep away from me!"

"Give me Rhyden's sword," Yeb said. "The anam'cladh. I know you took it. I know what you mean to do with it and I will not let you."

Jobin's brows narrowed. "You cannot stop me. Get away from me, you bastard rot, or I will cut you open. By my breath, I will."

Yeb paused, looking at Jobin. The young man gasped for frantic breath, and stumbled back again, keeping the blade poised and wagging in midair. "You do not want to do this, Jobin," Yeb said to him quietly, calmly. "Rhyden Fabhcun is your friend. We are all your friends."

Jobin shook his head. "He is not my friend," he seethed. "My friends are dead -- all of them good men -- dead because of him! Captain Fainne is dead, butchered because of him! And all along, while we have bloody suffered -- while my friends were bloody well butchered -- he has been safe and sound, bugging that damn rot bitch and having a splendid time of things!"

"It is not Rhyden's fault those things have come to pass," Yeb said.

"No, you are right," Jobin snapped, shaking the knife at Yeb. "It is not his fault -- it is yours! You bloody rot lot of savages -- you took him, and the Captain followed you! You with your bloody dragons, your Dwarf magic, your creepy-ass kid who speaks inside of people's skulls! You are all bloody mad! You took the Elf! You might have asked -- we would have bloody well let you have him so that Captain Fainne would not have known! The Elf was rot damn luck to us -- take him! Let him bring his bloody piss luck upon the lot of you! Now they are all dead -- the Captain, my friends, all of them dead because of you!"

"You cannot give that sword to Mongoljin," Yeb said. He stepped forward, and Jobin shied back, his teeth bared like a bristling dog's, his brows furrowed.

"I can, and I bloody will," Jobin hissed. "If you try and stop me, you bastard, I will carve you neck to knees. I will bloody do it."

"I do not know what Mongoljin has promised you, but she has lied," Yeb said. His brows lifted in gentle implore. "We can keep you safe from her."

Jobin recoiled as if he had been slapped. He began to laugh, a harsh sound filled more with despair than humor. "Keep me safe from her? She is *inside of me*, you stupid bastard!" he screeched, spittle flying from his lips. He moved his hand from his belly, his fingers hooked into desperate claws as he clutched at his temple, shaking his head. "She is bloody in me! She retched something into my mouth and she is with me! I can feel her scraping and crawling around in my skull, behind my eyes!"

He glared at Yeb, saliva running in a thick rivulet down his chin, his eyes glassy and manic. "She is eating me alive!" he screamed.

"Let me help you," Yeb said. "Give me the anam'cladh. Come back with me to the camp. Let me -- "

"Can you get her out of me?" Jobin cried. "You stupid rot, you did not even know she was there! None of you knew -- not even your boy, that rotted little whelp with his whispering in my head, his questions, his staring! None of you knew! None of you can help me!"

His eyes glistened with tears and he laughed again, staggering, tangling his fingers in his hair. "She is inside of me," he said again. "I can feel her all of the time. I...I

cannot escape her. I cannot hide from her.” He stared at Yeb, his face twisted with anguish. “Just let me go. Let me go to her so that I can be rid of her. I can be rid of you all.”

“Not with the anam’cladh,” Yeb said. “Go if you must, but I cannot let you deliver the sword to her.”

Jobin blinked at him, ashen and stricken. The despair drained from his face, yielding to fury, and he lunged at Yeb, screaming at him. “You bloody bastard -- !”

Yeb sidestepped, swinging his arm up in a sharp arc as Jobin shoved the dagger at him. Yeb caught Jobin’s wrist against his forearm, knocking aside the strike, and Jobin stared at him, his eyes round and startled.

“I cannot let you give her the sword,” Yeb said again, his other hand darting out, coiling about Jobin’s wrist. He moved swiftly, unexpectedly, craning Jobin’s arm at an agonizing angle. Jobin cried out hoarsely, his brows lifting in pain, and his hand opened reflexively, dropping the knife.

He crumpled to his knees, pawing at Yeb’s deliberate, unyielding grasp with his free hand. “Let me go!” he cried. “Hoah...Mother Above, you bastard! Turn loose of me!”

Yeb opened his hand and stepped away from Jobin as the young man crumpled, gasping, clutching his wounded wrist. “I do not wish to hurt you,” Yeb told him. “But I will if I must, Jobin. Give me the anam’cladh.”

“You...bloody rot...” Jobin snatched the knife from the ground and sprang to his feet, rushing headlong at Yeb. Yeb pivoted his hips and hooked his hand against Jobin’s, wrenching his wrist again, drawing a shrill wail from the man. Yeb swung his other elbow forward, driving it squarely into Jobin’s nose. Jobin recoiled, and Yeb released him. He floundered back clumsily, his hands darting to his face. Blood seeped between his fingers, pouring from his nose.

“You...you rot...!” Jobin cried, his voice muffled and pinched around his hands. He stared at Yeb in wide-eyed disbelief. “You...you broke my rot damn nose!”

“Give me the anam’cladh,” Yeb said again, calmly, dipping his hand into his bogcu pouch and closing his fingers against the handle of his dalbur fan.

“I will shove it up your bloody ass, you son of a bitch,” Jobin said. He stooped, snatching his knife up again, and charged Yeb, blood smeared across his face, spattering from his lips as he screamed, an inarticulate, furious garble of sounds.

Yeb whipped the fan out from his bogcu; he snapped his wrist and the fan splayed open. He pivoted, moving his feet, dancing with Jobin as he attacked and the length of the blade speared through the soft hide webbing of the fan. Before Jobin had time to recover or recoil, Yeb snapped his wrist again, and the fan closed, the thick bone shafts of its frame collapsing against the dagger blade, pinning it between them. He canted his arm, hooking his elbow at an abrupt angle, and Jobin yelped as the knife twisted loose of his grasp. Yeb jerked it away from him and opened the fan, sending the blade flying. It speared into the ground ten feet from them, its hilt pointed skyward, wagging in the air.

“Bastard!” Jobin hissed, swinging his fist at Yeb’s face. Yeb swung his arm around, blocking the blow. Jobin’s brows furrowed all the more and he swung at Yeb with his other fist; again, Yeb blocked the punch.

“Give me the sword,” Yeb said.

“Bugger yourself!” Jobin screamed, his fists flying wildly. The ease with which Yeb countered his attacks, blocked his blows only increased his rage. “I will kill you!” he screeched. “I will bloody rot kill you, you bastard savage!”

Yeb caught his fist between his hands, tired of the game. He moved, sweeping Jobin’s arm up and outward, away from his body. Jobin screamed, his rage ripping into pain, and then Yeb buckled his knees and threw the man over his shoulder. Jobin crashed against the ground onto his back, the breath *whoofing* from him. Yeb seized his hand again, craning his wrist at an excruciating angle, and he genuflected atop Jobin, planting his knee firmly against the man’s sternum.

“I am sorry this has come upon you,” he said, as Jobin squirmed and shrieked beneath him. Jobin could not fight him too much; the pain in his wrist kept him fairly well immobilized and helpless. “And I am sorry you will not let us try and help you.”

With his free hand, Yeb reached down between his legs, beneath the flap of Jobin’s del. He felt the hilt of the anam’cladh and drew it out. “But I cannot let you take the sword.”

“No!” Jobin gasped, clawing for the hilt. “No...you cannot...!”

Yeb twisted his wrist, and Jobin cried out, breathless and hoarse. Yeb stood, holding fast to his wrist until he was clear of Jobin’s fists and feet, and then opened his hand, releasing him.

Jobin rolled onto his side, his cries dissolving into moans as he cradled his wrist against his chest. “You...you bastard...!” he whimpered, shuddering as he began to weep.

“Go back to the Khahl,” Yeb told him. “Go back to Mongoljin and tell her she has failed again. If you return to our camp, I will kill you myself.”

He turned and walked away, tucking the anam’cladh beneath the flap of his del. He paused, his eyes flying wide as all at once, unexpectedly, he felt his hiimori restore within him. It was as if a rush of wind suddenly gusted through him. His mind was opened wide, his extrasensory perceptions restored in full and he realized. *The shroud is gone*, he thought. Either he had ventured beyond the perimeter of Temu’s ability to maintain his manang, or the manang had fallen somehow.

He sensed Jobin behind him, even before his ears registered the sounds of the man’s feet scrambling against the ground. He whirled about gracefully as Jobin charged him, the knife brandished again, aimed for his gut. He felt the breeze of the blade whip against his del, rustling the fur trimming and he caught Jobin’s head between his hands. Yeb stepped forward, wrenching Jobin’s head abruptly toward his shoulder; there was a moist, sickening crunch, and a last, sharp, startled intake of Jobin’s breath. Yeb drew his hands away and stepped back as Jobin crumpled to the ground, the knife tumbling from his hand as his fingers went limp. Jobin collapsed against the gravel, his neck snapped, his head twisted nearly around to his spine.

Yeb looked down at him for a long moment. Jobin’s eyes were opened, his mouth agape, his face frozen in a mask of shocked surprise. Yeb genuflected, reaching down and easing Jobin’s eyelids closed with his fingertips. “Ci yabuqu ende olqu sunesu modun,” he said softly. *Leave here to find the great spirit tree.* “Ci ayu sula, ami seunesu sibaqu, sula nusku ogere kuliyeku toruku, qariqu.” *You are free, ami spirit bird, free to fly upward to wait for rebirth, to return.*

He sensed something else, a frigid wind battering through the trees, buffeting against his face like an icy breath. He raised his gaze from Jobin's body, his brows narrowed, his hand reaching beneath the flap of his del for the anam'cladh.

Your shroud is gone, Mongoljin said. She stood framed by the cliff walls twenty feet away from him, a slender, silhouetted figure draped in shadows. He could feel her; the darkness of her gerel made the air seem to shiver.

He heard her laugh softly, a gurgling sound, and then she stepped forward, smiling at him. *Your shroud is gone*, she said again. *Now there is nothing to keep me from you.*

Her power had grown since last they had met. Yeb could feel this, too. Her gerel trembled with the restless, relentless energy of insurmountable hiimori, and he realized. She had been feeding on other shamans. She had devoured those among the Khahl to strengthen herself.

I tasted your women, Mongoljin whispered, her voice slithering inside of his mind. *The old idugan and her oyutan. You had tasted of her flesh, had you not? The young girl, Nala Sahni? I tasted of her spirit, shaman. I know her sweetness, too. She is with me always...even now.*

"Nala!" Yeb whispered in dismay, rising to his feet.

And now I will taste of yours, Yeb Oyugundei, Mongoljin told him. She held out her hand, the pale, splayed fingers of a drowned woman. *Give me the sword.*

Yeb drew the anam'cladh from beneath his del. He closed his fingers about the hilt as his brows furrowed, his mouth twisted in a grim line. As his fingertips met his thumb, the blade of the anam'cladh seared above the tang, a spear of bright red fire.

"Here it is," Yeb said to Mongoljin, settling his feet into a fighting stance and grasping the anam'cladh between his fists. He spat at her. "Come and take it, bitch."

Trejaeran saw the world as vivid, iridescent, writhing masses of color and elongated shadow patterns. Every living thing, from the grass on the ground to birds in the sky had a separate color to his gaze; what the Oirat would have called a gerel, or spirit glow. Men, Elves and Dwarves all appeared as green forms of illumination to him, unless they possessed some modicum of the sight, or hiimori. He could distinguish

Rhyden anywhere; his friend blazed as golden as the sun midday in the height of summer. Rhyden's spirit burned so brightly, he could snuff other gerels around him into shadows. Temu's burned brightly, too, a brilliant shade of luminescent blue, much like Trejaeran's own. Non-organic matter, like rocks or water, appeared in varying grey tones to Trejaeran, with only occasional colors to mark life forces that might have called such places home. The cliffs of the Ujugar, the shallow water of the Okin River were all dim to him, shadows among a backdrop of shadows. He did not like the mountains. He wished that Rhyden's journey might have brought them into the forests, where at least he might have seen life aglow all around him.

The only time Trejaeran saw the world as he had before he had died was when he visited Rhyden; when Rhyden's power drew him into the plane the Oirat called the jabsar. Here, Rhyden's mind would weave a magnificent tapestry of sights and sounds for Trejaeran to enjoy. Here, he could feel again. He could touch things, explore textures with his hands and feet. He could feel wind against his face, tugging at his hair. He could smell the salt of the sea, the sap of pine trees. Rhyden was not even aware of the beauty he drew Trejaeran into; he had no idea that whenever his mind opened, even if it was only dreamed or imagined to him, Trejaeran felt alive again.

Trejaeran dissipated his form in the tunnels of Heese, letting his sight guide him to the place along the riverbank where he had felt Yeb's waning energy -- and Mongoljin's icy, slithering presence. He coalesced along the muddy banks of the Okin, in a place nearly devoid of light or color to his gaze. There was only his glow, a pale corona around his form.

Yeb, he called out, opening his spirit, extending his sight in a broad swath around him. *Yeb, where are you?*

He moved forward. He did not know if what he did was precisely walking anymore. When he coalesced his spirit in full, concentrating his energy, he could solidify into a semblance of his living form. He could not feel in this state; his perceptions and senses did not alter, but he could touch things, interact with his environment. He could walk in that form, his feet against the ground. In his current form, a sort of translucent, phantom-like state, he moved his feet and legs, but glided of his own volition rather than

anything else. This was a cautionary state; he was less vulnerable and could dissipate himself, flee more readily.

He looked down and saw a man sprawled against the graveled earth, a discarded dagger nearby. The man was a dim shade of grey, draped in heavy shadows against the black ground beneath him; he was dead. Someone had broken his neck and his head lolled at a peculiar angle, twisted back toward the midline of his spine. Trejaeran recognized his face: Jobin Dunster.

He looked around again. Now that he had moved forward, he could see around the edge of one of the nearby outcropping cliff walls. A dim glow seeped around the cragged edge; a feeble, scarlet glow Trejaeran recognized. *Yeb*, he called again, moving toward the light. *Yeb, it is Trejaeran. Are you alright?*

He had no sense of Mongoljin. He had felt her like a frigid wind blasting down from the peak of Ondur Dobu, and then she had faded. He did not know what had happened, or why she had retreated. Trejaeran extended his senses as far as he dared without weakening himself but there was nothing of Mongoljin he could feel.

He moved around the corner of rock and saw Yeb huddled against the ground, his back toward Trejaeran. The shaman's gerel fluttered and danced about him like a candle caught in a persistent draft. He hunkered with his face turned to the ground, cradling his head between his hands. He was shuddering, whispering to himself, words Trejaeran could not distinguish.

Yeb, what has happened? Trejaeran asked. He was alarmed by the condition of Yeb's gerel; such a disturbance usually indicated someone was mortally wounded, their life-force fading. *I sensed Mongoljin. Did she attack you? Your gerel is very weak. Are you hurt?*

He moved toward Yeb, and paused as Yeb thrust his hand behind him, his fingers splayed, flapping at Trejaeran. "Do...do not..." he gasped hoarsely. In Trejaeran's mind, he said, *Do not come near me.*

There was blood on his hand, a dark stain smeared against the red glow of his form. Trejaeran reached for him, his alarm mounting. He tried to open his mind to Yeb, to see what had happened from the man's memories, and was startled and bewildered when he could not; it felt as though he ran headlong into a stone wall.

Yeb, I cannot feel you, he said. Your mind is closed to me. Tell me what has happened.

“Keep...keep away from me...” Yeb whimpered, shoving his hand against his face again. As he did, he turned his head slightly toward his shoulder, and Trejaeran realized where the blood had come from -- Yeb had gouged out his own eyes.

Yeb! Trejaeran gasped. Mother Above, what has --

As he reached for Yeb, solidifying his form to touch Yeb’s sleeve, Yeb screamed, a horrifying, mindless sound. He whirled, planting his hand against Trejaeran’s shoulder and shoved mightily. Trejaeran fell back, reflexively dissipating into his shade form again. His eyes flew wide, and he dissolved in full, scattering in a spray of blue light as Yeb thrust the blade of the anam’cladh directly at his chest.

The spear of scarlet fire, twined and twisted with smoke-like shadow punched into the earth nearly to the hilt. Trejaeran coalesced nearby, staring at Yeb with wide, stricken eyes. “Yeb!”

“Keep away from me!” Yeb shrieked, lurching to his feet. He kept one hand shoved against his face, his fingers hooking into the flesh of his temples, gouging deep, bloody gashes in his scalp. He wrenched the anam’cladh loose from the ground with the other and shambled toward Trejaeran. “Get out of here! Go to Temu! She is inside of me! Go to him before she...she makes me -- !”

His voice ripped up shrill octaves, his words dissolving into shrieks. He lunged at Trejaeran, claspng the hilt of the anam’cladh between his hands and driving the blade toward his heart. Trejaeran threw up his hand, and Yeb’s feet flew out from beneath him. He crashed to the ground, smacking against the dirt, the anam’cladh jarred from his fingers.

“Yeb...” Trejaeran whispered, anguished. He moved his hand, gesturing with his fingers, reaching for the anam’cladh with his mind. The silver hilt skittered across the ground toward him. It rose into the air as if lifted by invisible hands, sailing toward his outstretched palm.

Not so easily, little endur, Yeb hissed, raising his head from the ground. His brows were narrowed over his ruined eye sockets, and his hand shot out, his fingers

hooked and splayed. The anam'cladh hilt wavered in midair, drawn to a halt, suspended between them. *Not so fast.*

Trejaeran blinked at Yeb. It had been Yeb's voice in his mind, but it had been Mongoljin's words, her will behind them. She was in Yeb; she had forced herself into his form. She had not yet vanquished the shaman's ami to the qarang'qui, but she was there inside of him and she was stronger than Yeb.

Trejaeran frowned. The anam'cladh turned in a slow spiral in the air and moved in his direction again. He could feel her pulling against it; her strength was now tremendous. He had only ever sensed one other spirit stronger than this.

It is your sword no longer, little endur, Mongoljin seethed, and Trejaeran felt his mind's hold on the sword hilt suddenly slip in full against her might. The anam'cladh sailed away from him, slapping against Yeb's outstretched palm. Yeb curled his fingers around it as he drew his legs beneath him, rising to his feet, and the spear of black-tainted scarlet fire appeared once more.

Trejaeran glared at Mongoljin. *Let Yeb go,* he said. *Release him -- spirit and form. Do it now, Mongoljin.*

The corner of Yeb's blood-streaked mouth hooked upward. *Or what, little endur?*

Trejaeran cut his eyes to Yeb's feet. At his gaze, the ground beneath Yeb opened, twin holes gaping in earth and stone rived wide beneath the shaman's boots, and he fell. Trejaeran nodded sharply and the earth closed, collapsing in around Yeb's knees, pinning his legs in the ground. He looked up, meeting Yeb's bloody eyes, knowing Mongoljin could see him. *Or I will drive you from him, bitch,* he hissed.

The earth surged again, spewing in pillars beneath Yeb's wrists. Mounds of dirt heaved upward, clapping about Yeb's hands. The anam'cladh was battered from his fingers as the earth closed, trapping him, and Trejaeran opened his hand, drawing the anam'cladh to him in a swift motion. The hilt flew through the air, and he snatched it, coiling his fist about it. He had to solidify himself to touch it; as his hand closed, a blade of bright blue fire appeared.

Mongoljin turned Yeb's head, regarding the mounds of earth that pinned his hands and feet. She glanced at Trejaeran, and Yeb's shoulders shuddered as she

began to laugh, Yeb's voice fluttering with wicked humor. *Do you think this will stop me?* she asked. *Do you think you are strong enough to drive me from him?*

I know I am, Trejaeran said, and he moved toward her, drawing the anam'cladh back to skewer through Yeb's heart. Before he even had the chance to thrust the blade forward, something that felt like an invisible, catapulted boulder slammed into his chest. Trejaeran's head snapped back at the force of the blow. He was thrown off of his feet and backward, smashing into the cliff base fifteen feet behind him. There was no pain at the massive impact, but he felt the stone crush beneath him, the granite crumbling as he slammed against it.

He dropped to the ground, landing on his knees and falling forward. He felt something jerk his arm violently, flinging him back against the wall again, and the sword was ripped from his grasp. "No -- !" he shouted.

The pillars of earth he had summoned around Yeb's hands exploded in a cloud of dirt and debris. The ground beneath him opened once more and Trejaeran felt the Bith itself tremble beneath him as Mongoljin forced Yeb's body from the holes. The ground writhed beneath Yeb, bubbling and spewing in a growing mound of earth, raising him. She caught the anam'cladh in Yeb's hand, and as the blade appeared, there was no red left in its glow; there was only shadow now, a spear of darkness.

"Mathair Maith..." Trejaeran whispered, stumbling to his feet. *Good Mother.* He could feel the grit of crushed mountainside tumbling from his shoulders and he shook his head, spraying granite dust.

You cannot stop me, Trejaeran Muirel, Mongoljin hissed, and Trejaeran recoiled in surprise. *I know your name, little endur,* she told him. *I know all of your secrets now. I have seen inside of your falcon's mind. I know who he is. I know who you are and I know why you have bound yourself to him.*

Release him! Trejaeran roared, and he lashed out with his mind, battering Yeb from atop the mound of dirt. The shaman fell sideways, tumbling down the slope. He struck the ground facedown and trembled with laughter.

What will you do, Trejaeran? Mongoljin asked, raising Yeb's face to look at him. She spat; one of Yeb's teeth smacked against the dirt, and she laughed all the more.

She still clutched the anam'cladh in his fist, and she moved slowly, shoving Yeb's hands beneath her to rise.

Trejaeran shoved his hand forward, and Yeb's body flew back, his shoulders slamming into the wall of dirt behind him. Trejaeran folded his fingers toward his palm, striding toward the shaman, his brows furrowed with murderous intensity. Yeb's head craned back as if Trejaeran clamped his palm beneath his chin; his breath whistled feebly as he panted for air.

What will you do? Mongoljin whispered, her voice like trickles of glacial water through Trejaeran's mind. *You do not hurt me. You only hurt the shaman.*

Trejaeran froze, his eyes flying wide. He opened his hand, and Yeb's body crumpled to the ground. Yeb clutched at his throat, heaving for breath. Mongoljin cackled inside of Trejaeran's mind.

Poor little endur. What will you do?

Yeb lifted his face, turning his head blindly to Trejaeran. "Please..." he croaked, spitting out a thick mouthful of blood. He reached for Trejaeran, his hand shaking. "Kill...kill me..."

I can keep him here, Mongoljin said to Trejaeran. Yeb moaned, shaking his head violently, and then he shambled to his feet again, staggering clumsily in place, a marionette struggling against its puppeteer. *I am strong enough to defy even the Tegsh now, little endur. I can keep Yeb's ami within his form for as long as I will it. I do not have to banish him to the qarang'qui. I can keep him with me. I can make him watch, helpless and horrified, as I destroy all who are dear to him -- his bitch Oirat queen, his precious golden falcon, Duua's rotted whelp heir. I can make him do it with his own hands and I can make him watch it all.*

Yeb smiled at him, nearly tender in fashion. "And I think I shall begin with you, Trejaeran," he said.

Yeb staggered toward Trejaeran, brandishing the anam'cladh. *Fight her, Yeb,* Trejaeran said. He opened his hand toward the ground, encasing Yeb's feet in earth again, trying to restrain him. Yeb glanced down; he waved his hands at the mounds of dirt that had risen about his feet and they crumbled away. "Kill me," he pleaded to Trejaeran.

Yes, Trejaeran, kill him, Mongoljin said, laughing again. You have that capacity within your nature. You have killed before, have you not? There was a time once when you embraced the darkness within you, the shadow that makes you and I so alike.

I am nothing like you, Trejaeran said.

Oh, but you are, Mongoljin purred as Yeb smiled. The baga'han gazriin ezen devoured all of Rhyden Fabhcun's memories, just as he gave all of his to the Elf. I know all about you. You told Rhyden yourself. You nearly yielded to the darkness within you. It was his heart -- his merits -- that prevented you, not yours.

"Fight her, Yeb," Trejaeran said. He thrust his hand out and Yeb flew back as if jerked by a line. He crashed against the ground, sprawling on his back. "Fight her, drive her out of you. Make her face me in the open and I will destroy her."

Even now, your heart is tempted, Mongoljin whispered, as Yeb sat up, still holding the anam'cladh. This kindness you proffer, these good deeds you perform...they are your penance, are they not? You are not bound to Rhyden Fabhcun. You have been bound to him, forced to watch him suffer and struggle, this noble and decent heart that you long to possess -- and could never call your own.

Shut up, Trejaeran said, closing his hands into fists.

You have even added to his suffering, have you not? How much torment that must have brought for you to bear. I can smell it on you, endur. You have tormented his mind and heart -- fifteen years of suffering. He blamed himself for what you did. He left his family forgotten and behind him, his friends. He abandoned his life -- any life. You broke his heart, and you broke it all the more with each passing day, every waning year.

"Shut up," Trejaeran hissed.

Even now the shadow taints you, Mongoljin said. Do you not see that? No matter what you do, you will always know darkness. Even if you held the anam'cladh in hand, you could not defeat me with it. Your heart lacks the strength -- that is why you gave the blade to Rhyden. That is why you told Duua's heir to take it, to drive the baga'han gazriin ezen from Rhyden's form. You knew it was useless in your hand, that your heart was too filled with darkness to command it.

The shadow does not taint me, Trejaeran seethed. Not now -- not ever again. Give me the sword, bitch. Let me show you.

If you are so certain, come and claim it from us, Mongoljin said, and Yeb lunged at Trejaeran, swinging the anam'cladh in a broad arc at his throat. Trejaeran recoiled, drawing his hand up reflexively. Yeb snapped back, careening through the air again, slamming into a cliff wall.

"You...you cannot hurt me..." Yeb gasped, reeling dizzily as Mongoljin forced him to sit up. He turned his grisly gaze toward Trejaeran and laughed softly. "Strike all you want. Use all of your power in full. You only hurt the shaman."

Yeb, you can fight her, Trejaeran said. *Help me. Please, let me help you.*

Yeb stumbled to his feet. He staggered toward Trejaeran, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a feral, blood-smeared snarl. He swung the anam'cladh again and again; the black blade hissed as it sliced through the air. Trejaeran walked backwards, keeping his eyes fixed on Yeb, focusing his mind as he reached for the shaman.

Listen to me, he said. *I am here, Yeb. I am with you. I will not fight you.*

Trejaeran backpedaled as the anam'cladh whistled in the air only scant inches from his breast. *You are my friend, Yeb. You are Temuchin's friend and he needs you. Fight Mongoljin. Summon your strength, your energy -- push her out of you.*

Trejaeran's feet struck something behind him, and he stumbled, falling onto his rump. He had tripped over Jobin Dunster's corpse and Mongoljin seized advantage of the clumsy distraction. Yeb lunged at him, drawing the anam'cladh back, poised to ram it through Trejaeran's heart.

"Yeb, no!" Trejaeran cried. Even if his dissipated himself, there was no time; he could not escape the anam'cladh's blade. Yeb drove the sword forward, and Trejaeran drew his hands up to his face, cowering, anticipating the moment of fire punching through him, knowing there would be nothing after that moment but darkness, empty and eternal.

He heard Yeb cry out hoarsely, anguished, and then there was a metallic clatter and a heavy thud. Trejaeran opened his eyes and saw the shaman had fallen to his knees before him. He had cast aside the anam'cladh and folded himself toward the ground, hooking his hands against his temples.

“Yeb...” Trejaeran whispered. Mongoljin was still within him, but she had receded; Yeb had forced her back somehow. Trejaeran could feel it. He drew himself onto his knees and reached for Yeb. “Yeb, please...”

Yeb recoiled at his touch, flapping his arm and shrugging his shoulder. “Do...do not touch me,” he gasped. He lowered his hands and turned blindly toward the sound of Trejaeran’s voice. “Kill me,” he begged. “I...please, she...she is fighting me. I...I cannot keep her...not long...please...”

“Get out of him, Mongoljin,” Trejaeran said. He pressed his fingertips against Yeb’s brow and lowered his face, his brows furrowing. “Get out of him now,” he whispered, concentrating all of his energy, all of his strength, trying to draw Mongoljin’s spirit from Yeb. “Leave him alone. If you must take someone, take me, you bitch. I am right here. Take me.”

He trembled with exertion, his teeth gritted, his brows drawn deeply. *Leave him*, he commanded Mongoljin. *Release him. Take me instead!* He struggled to force her loose of Yeb, but she was too strong. He could sense the bitter darkness of her, infused within Yeb, resisting him, clinging to her place in Yeb’s form with all of her might. He gasped, jerking his hand away. He blinked at Yeb, helpless and stricken. “I...please, I...” he whispered.

Yeb turned his face to Trejaeran’s. “There...there is only one way to...to draw her from me...”

“No,” Trejaeran said, shaking his head. He reached for the anam’cladh, snatching it in hand. The blade seared above the tang, bright blue fire. “No, I can drive her out. I...I can do it, Yeb. She was wrong. She...”

“Trejaeran,” Yeb said, and his hand fumbled against Trejaeran’s wrist, staying the blade. “I...I could not do it, either.” He reached for the front of his del, and for the first time, Trejaeran saw the hide was singed here, burned and blackened above his heart. Yeb jerked against the flap of hide, ripping the buttons loose as he opened his del, and Trejaeran moaned softly to see the bright red weal seared into Yeb’s flesh.

“No.” Trejaeran shook his head again. “No, Yeb, it is my sword...made for my hand...mine, and I...I can...”

There is only one hand that sword was...was made for, Yeb said inside of Trejaeran's mind. *And it...it was not mine...or...or yours...*

He shuddered, convulsing, his shoulders thrashing, his head snapping back on his neck. Garbled caws uttered from his throat, and his hand moved, pawing against the ground, slapping in the dirt. His fingers hooked against the bone hilt of the dagger near Jobin's body, and he coiled his hand around it, jerking it toward him. "Help me...!" he whimpered to Trejaeran, the blade wagging, shaking between his fists. "Tengri help me...I cannot keep her...from me...!"

Trejaeran tossed the anam'cladh aside and closed his hands about Yeb's, holding the shaman's grip steady. "She...she will try to take Temuchin," Yeb said. "She meant to use me...she...she will try to use you, too..."

"I will not let her," Trejaeran said. "I promise you, Yeb."

He felt Yeb's thumb brush against his; more than the usual, numb sensation of flesh sliding against his form that Trejaeran was accustomed to, he could feel Yeb, the warmth of his skin, the friction of his touch. He felt Yeb's mind open wide to him, and in that moment, he could see the world as Yeb had, the breadth of the Bith in vivid, extraordinary fragrance, sound and color. Trejaeran blinked against the heat of tears in his eyes; for the first time in twenty years, he was alive enough to weep. He looked into the ruins of Yeb's eyes and gasped softly, anguished. "Forgive me," he whispered.

"There...is nothing to forgive," Yeb told him gently, smiling at him. "I...I will see you again in...in the great spirit tree."

Yeb fell forward, crumpling against Trejaeran's shoulder, impaling himself on the dagger. Trejaeran cried out hoarsely, feeling the blade spear through Yeb's ribcage, finding its mark in his heart. He felt the wet heat of Yeb's blood against his hands; he felt Yeb draw a solitary, shuddering breath against his throat, and then his hands fell away from Trejaeran's. The sensation of his mind faded, and with it, the perceptions he had given to Trejaeran. The world slipped back into its customary shades of grey and black. Trejaeran cradled Yeb in his arms, holding him, tucking his face against the shaman's shoulder as the scarlet glow of his gerel faded to darkness.

Mongoljin was upon him from the moment of Yeb's death. Trejaeran sensed the release of her spirit from Yeb's form before he saw her; her presence struck him like a gale-force wind, frigid and stinging, battering into him.

"You bitch!" Trejaeran screamed, throwing himself sideways, seizing the anam'cladh in his fist. He rolled onto his knees and then sprang to his feet, swinging the sword. "You rot damn bitch!"

She coalesced before him. Shadows from the cliff walls, the ground, every nook and cranny flowed together like black water, pooling in the air, forming the silhouetted outline of a woman. As her features appeared, pale flesh and disheveled, sodden hair, Trejaeran thrust his hand out, sending the mountainside crashing down at her. Tons of earth and granite heaved at his command and collapsed down the slopes of the Ujugar from the heights of Ondur Dobu itself with a thunderous roar that echoed for miles. The landslide plowed into the earth at astonishing speed and Trejaeran felt the ground shudder beneath his feet, writhing with the force of the impact. A tremendous cloud of dirt and dust rose in the air and billowed outward, swallowing the river canyon in darkness.

As the resonant rumble of the fallen earth faded, rolling among the peaks of the Khar like distant thunder, Trejaeran stepped forward, clasping the anam'cladh between his hands, his eyes aglow with blazing blue fire.

Did you think this would stop me? Mongoljin asked. The mountainous pile of rubble trembled, rocks and gravel spilling down the side. Her hand thrust out from the broken stone and fallen earth, casting boulders aside, crashing to the ground as if they were filled with down. *Did you really have such feeble hope, little endur?*

Her hand waned into smoke, wafting up in spiraling tendrils. The shadowy stream flowed over the slope of debris, pooling against the ground. Mongoljin's form rose from the smoke, her head and shoulders rising, her face lifting, her black eyes finding his as her torso, arms and legs unfurled from the shadows. Her hand shot out, her fingers hooked into talons, and Trejaeran flew backward, shoved with impossible speed and force. He slammed into the cliffside, feeling the granite yield behind him, splintering and crumbling. He plowed a cleft eleven feet deep into the breast of the mountainside before

he came to a halt, sprawled atop broken rocks. He fell forward onto his knees and then rose to his feet, the blade of the anam'cladh blazing in his fist.

Did you think that would stop me? he hissed, emerging from the crevice. He strode toward her, fixing his gaze upon her, his brows furrowed. His pace quickened as he drew near and he whirled the hilt of the anam'cladh against his palm. *Did you have such pathetic hope, you rotted bitch?*

She did not move. She did not even flinch from his approach, and Trejaeran drew the anam'cladh back, clasping it with both hands. He lunged forward, planting his foot between hers and shoved the blade into her with all of his might. The blue shaft punched between her breasts, just beneath her sternum, and Trejaeran stepped against her, his fists striking her chest as the blade rammed through her, thrusting out of her back between her shoulder blades.

She did not dissipate. Trejaeran blinked at her, stunned and stricken, and found her smiling at him, her black eyes glistening. They were as close as lovers, near enough to kiss and she lowered her face, canting her head as if she meant to do just that.

"Pure of heart, little endur," she murmured, the cold, clammy blade of her tongue darting from her mouth, lapping against his cheek.

"It is not possible...!" Trejaeran gasped.

Mongoljin's smile widened. *You must be pure of heart to wield it in full*, she whispered in his mind. She clucked her tongue at him, raising her brows sympathetically. *Poor little endur. I tried to tell you. Your heart is torn -- caught between the light and shadow within you. You will never know purity.*

She caught him by the back of the head, her fingers tangling in his hair and he recoiled, trying vainly to dissipate his spirit, to flee into the jabsar. To his horror, he found he could not; she had trapped him somehow with her touch, forcing him to remain coalesced against her grasp.

There is no use in trying, she purred as her hand closed into a fist, forcing his face toward hers. *I have bound you. Your gerel is strong, endur. Such a lovely shade of blue. In all of the world, I thought only the Negh could know such color.*

He struggled against her as she pulled him against her, his eyes flown wide. *No -*
- !

I will take your gerel from you, she whispered. I will give it to my Targutai. He bears the mark of the Negh -- and now, he will bear the Negh's spirit fire.

Her mouth settled against his. At her kiss, as her tongue delved between his lips, he felt his form wane, shifting into translucence. She drew him into her mouth, as one might inhale the delicate fragrance of incense smoke. She moaned softly as she devoured him, as though the sensation was exquisite to her, as if she had been moved by a young and eager lover to some great, excruciating pleasure.

No... he whimpered, squirming against her. The anam'cladh hilt slipped from his fingers; as he released his grasp, the blue blade extinguished and the hilt tumbled to the ground. *No...do not...!*

Trejaeran began to dissipate, all of his strength, his power wrenched from him, drawn into Mongoljin. He could feel her consuming him, his form yielding to a terrible, leaden coldness; he could sense the world fading from his eyes, his senses, what precious little light and shadow he had known slipping into darkness. *Rhyden!* he cried out desperately, trying to fight her, helpless against her. *Rhyden, le do thoil! Help me! Rhyden!*

She released him and he collapsed, crumpling to the ground. He was more shadow than form now, and he huddled against the dirt, too weak to even lift his head. She had stripped him of his power, suckled it from him like a greedy child, and there was nothing left for him. He moaned, trembling.

Rhyden cannot help you now, Mongoljin said softly. She reached down, slipping her fingers delicately around the hilt of the anam'cladh, lifting it against her palm. As her hand closed around the sword, a length of shadow appeared above the tang, the black fire of her soul. *There is no one who can help you.*

She shoved her palm toward Trejaeran and he whipped into the air like a rag doll hurtled by an infuriated toddler. He slammed into the mountainside again, smashing into the stone. He crumpled facedown on the ground. He moaned, struggling to rise, and he felt her invisible hands close against him, jerking him into the air. She held him there, suspended above the ground. He fought to move, but she began to close her fingers, folding them toward her palm, and as she did, Trejaeran could feel the air around him collapse, pinning his legs together, leaving his arms trapped helplessly at his sides.

You are nothing against me, Trejaeran Muirel, Mongoljin said, walking toward him, holding the anam'cladh in her hand.

You cannot wield it, either, he whispered as she stood beneath him. She lifted her hand and then lowered it to the ground; as she did, Trejaeran dropped down, his feet settling against the dirt. You said so yourself, Mongoljin...pure of heart. You cannot use the anam'cladh against me. Your heart is no more pure than mine.

Oh, but it is, Mongoljin told him with a smile. I loved my Duua, as I love my Targutai. They are one and the same -- spirit and blood infused in a single form. What is more pure than a mother's love? And for that love, little endur -- for her child -- a mother will make any sacrifice...endure any suffering...if only to see him know victory.

She leaned toward him, letting the tip of her nose brush against his cheek, her lips dance against his mouth. One does not need to be 'good' of heart, Trejaeran. They must only be 'pure.'

No -- ! Trejaeran gasped, and then Mongoljin rammed the blade of the anam'cladh through him.

Chapter Four

There...is only one hand that sword was...was made for, Temu heard Yeb say as he sprinted through the Oirat campsite, sending up a flutter of startled, alarmed cries from the Kelet as he passed. *And it...it was not mine...or...or yours...*

Yeb's voice was frail, the imprint of his gerel within Temu's mind feeble and fading. Temu bolted past the campsite, running with all of his might for the riverbank, his gutal pounding against the earth. "Yeb!" he screamed, his voice hoarse and breathless with exertion. "Yeb!"

He staggered, tripping and falling to his knees as he felt Yeb's presence within his mind suddenly vanish. One moment he was there -- a fragile, dim red glow -- and then the next, he had simply vanished. Temu gasped for breath, his eyes round and stricken, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No!" he whimpered, scrambling to his feet. He could hear the Oirat running behind him, calling out to him. He could hear Toghrul shouting his name, his voice overlapping with Aigiarn's shrill, urgent cries.

"Yeb, no," Temu whispered, running again. He heard thunder rumbling, and the ground beneath him shuddered, making him stumble again. His gutal slipped from beneath him and he went down hard, smacking his chin against the dirt. The thunder grew louder, roaring now, and the earth shook as though it was alive. He could hear something tremendous collapsing, crashing against the ground -- it sounded as if Ondur Dobu itself had suddenly crumbled. The Ujugar cliffs around him began to tremble; smaller landslides provoked by this massive collapse spilled down into the river canyon. Temu cried out, drawing his knees beneath him and clapping his hands over his head as a sudden rain of dirt and gravel spewed down at him. He heard the Kelet behind him crying out. The ground shook again as more rocks tumbled between them, blocking their passage behind him.

Temu did not need hiimori to realize what had caused the ground to move, the mountain to fall. Juchin might have called it the goddess Golotmo stirring, but it was not.

“Trejaeran!” He forced himself to his feet, choking and sputtering against the heavy haze of dust and grit in the air. He ran blindly through the cloud, holding his hands warily near his face. “Trejaeran!” he cried out. “Trejaeran, where are you?”

You must be pure of heart to wield it in full, he heard Mongoljin say, and he could feel her, the tremulous, terrible cold of her shivering through him. *Poor little endure. I tried to tell you. Your heart is torn -- caught between the light and shadow within you. You will never know purity. There is no use in trying.*

Temu smacked headlong into a fallen tumble of rocks. He sprawled over it, landing hard on his belly, *whoofing* the breath from himself. The side of his face struck a sharp edge of broken stone, gouging deeply, and he huddled against the ground, moaning, dazzling pinpoints of light winking before his eyes.

I have bound you. Your gerel is strong, endure. Such a lovely shade of blue.

“Trejaeran...” Temu shoved his hands beneath his, forcing himself to rise. “No...do...do not hurt him...”

In all of the world, I thought only the Negh could know such color.

“Do...not hurt him.” Temu stumbled to his feet. He had torn open his leg in the tumble, a corner of rock ripping through his pant leg, gouging a deep gash above his knee. When he stepped down, putting weight on his right side, a spear of bright pain lanced through him, and he sucked in a hissing breath, staggering, nearly falling again.

I will take your gerel from you, Mongoljin whispered.

“No,” Temu whimpered, forcing himself to move, to put weight on his injured leg, to stagger forward. “No, no, please...”

I will give it to my Targutai. He bears the mark of the Negh -- and now, he will bear the Negh's spirit fire.

“No...please...” Temu gasped, and he cowered, shoving his palms against his temples as Trejaeran's voice seared through him, screaming in helpless terror.

Rhyden...! Rhyden, le do thoil! Help me! Rhyden!

“No!” Temu cried, and he tried to run. He shambled through the haze, limping, feeling blood soaking into his pant leg in a hot, growing circumference. “No! Leave him alone!”

Rhyden cannot help you, Mongoljin said. There is no one who can help you now. You are nothing against me, Trejaeran Muirel.

Their voices faded in Temu's mind as a new sound filled him, something deep and resonant, rumbling within. He could feel his hiimori rising inside of him, trembling in the pit of his gut, just as it had within the tunnel of Heese -- only this time, it was stronger. This time, he could hear it, a growling roll of the thunder that would not fade; rather, it grew and grew, getting louder within his mind with every heartbeat, every breath. He could see it: a dim, pale blue glow that filled his line of sight from one corner of the horizon to the next, and grew brighter.

Do not hurt him, he thought. The pain in his leg was gone; obliterated by the roar in his mind, the searing blue fire that blazed before his eyes. He ran again, harder, faster, his brows furrowed, his hands closed into tight fists. *Leave him alone.*

The dust cloud waned, and ahead, he saw Mongoljin. She stood with her back to Temu, holding Trejaeran trapped and immobilized before her. Temu had a fraction of a second to realize Mongoljin had the anam'cladh -- somehow Rhyden's Elfin sword had come to be in her hand -- and then he cried out in helpless horror as she drew the black length of the blade back, ramming it into Trejaeran's breast. Trejaeran's head snapped back on his neck, and his mouth opened as if he meant to cry out. Before he could utter a sound, he was gone, his form waning to a momentary, iridescent mist before vanishing all together, disintegrated by the blade.

"No!" Temu shrieked, and the energy inside of him shoved its way out. He convulsed, staggering back as the air before him rippled, shimmering as if seared by blistering, sudden heat. The rippling band of air surged outward like the leading edge of a tidal wave. It rushed at Mongoljin and she whipped her head around, her black eyes flown wide as it plowed into her. She flew sideways, battered off of her feet and screeched as she sailed skyward, flung toward the peak of Ondur Dobu, disappearing in the night sky. The collapsed mountainside that lay spilled in heaps of rubble sprayed in all directions as the force of Temu's blast hit it, sending boulders, granite chunks and tons of earth scattering like feathers cast to a gale.

Temu crumpled to his knees, covering his head with his hands as the rubble crashed down to the earth again. He cried out in bright new terror as he felt the ground

shudder with each resounding impact; a splinter of mountain the size of two gers stacked atop one another smashed against the ground less than ten feet away from him, splattering him with dirt and gravel.

When the debris had stopped falling and there was nothing left but the hiss of grit slapping down against the earth, Temu raised his head, shuddering. The air was choked with a thick cloud of dust again, and he limped to his feet, crying out as his weight settled against his wounded knee. "Tr...Trejaeran...?" he called, choking, spitting out grit. He squinted, his eyes stinging with dirt and tears. He staggered forward, his hands outstretched, fumbling against fallen rocks in his path. "Trejaeran?"

He tried to sense Trejaeran, to open his mind, but there was nothing. Either his hiimori had failed him; this last, tremendous burst had sapped it of whatever strength had summoned it, or Trejaeran was simply not to be found. Temu had seen the anam'cladh blade pierce his heart; he had felt Mongoljin's terrible power, and he had realized, even as Trejaeran's form had dissolved before his eyes.

He is gone, Temu thought in dismay. She destroyed him. She sent him to the qarang'qui.

"No," he whispered, shaking his head, his heart unwilling to accept what his eyes had seen, what his mind had just told him. "No, she could not...she could not have..."

He stumbled about in a clumsy circle, tears spilling down his cheeks, his narrow chest hitching with sobs. "No, please," he whimpered, trying to force his mind open, trying to make himself sense Trejaeran. "Trejaeran!"

He tripped over something, his gutal stumbling over a fallen form he had not seen in the gloom. He spilled forward, smacking his chin again against the ground and sat up, shaking, weeping, inconsolable. "Trejaeran!" he cried desperately. "Trejaeran, please!"

He stretched out his hands, patting along the ground, and found what he had fallen over. He felt the texture of hide against his fumbling palms, and then flesh -- someone's head, a chin capped with a bristly, gravel-dusted beard. Temu recoiled, crying out, scrambling back, his gutal pedaling in the dirt. He listened, his eyes flown wide, but heard nothing moving. He crawled forward again, feeling blindly against the ground.

“Who is there?” His hands found the body again, and he patted against the motionless form, feeling the fur-trimmed collar of a del. “Please...who...who is there?”

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and dust enough for him to make out a shadow-draped, still silhouette before him. It was a man lying facedown on the ground, only his head had somehow been wrenched at an unnatural angle, leaving his cheek turned nearly to his spine. Temu leaned closer and then drew back, gasping in fright, recognizing the man’s face: Jobin Dunster.

He caught sight of another form, a shadow drooped against the ground nearby, and crawled toward it, his breath fluttering in his throat. It was another man, this one also lying sprawled facedown in the dirt. Temu saw a long, dark plait draped clumsily across his back; even in the dim gloom, he could see the yellow hue of the man’s khurim, and he moaned softly, his voice choked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. His throat constricted, tightening into a miniscule passage through which he could not force any air. He moved toward the body, crawling on his hands and knees, hiccupping for desperate breath. “No, no...please...”

He lay his hands against the man’s shoulders, rolling him over. “Yeb...!” His voice escaped him in a breathless, shrill mewl. “Y-Yeb...Yeb, oh...n-no, please...”

He did not know what his horrified, stunned mind first processed. He saw the carved, bone-handled knife protruding from Yeb’s heart, buried to the hilt. The front of his golden vest was stained black with blood. His face, Yeb’s gentle face, his kind features were caked in dust and blood, and his eyes...

“Yeb!” Temu gasped, and began to shudder uncontrollably. His breath and voice fluttered from him, helpless, anguished sounds. “Please,” he whimpered, and he touched Yeb’s shoulders. “Wake up, Yeb. Please...I...I love you...”

He lowered himself to the ground, lying on his side next to Yeb, drawing his knees toward his chest. “Please wake up,” he whispered, staring at Yeb, his eyes enormous and stricken. He snuggled against Yeb’s arm, tucking his forehead against the shaman’s sleeve. He could still smell the faint, familiar fragrance of Yeb within the blood-soaked fabric; the smoke of incense infused within his clothing.

“Please...” Temu whispered, closing his eyes. He hooked his arms around his knees and tried to draw himself into as tight a ball as he could. “Please,” he whispered over and over, huddling against Yeb, trembling in the dark. “Please wake up.”

He heard the others screaming for him, the pounding of their footsteps as they drew near. Toghrol rushed right past him, oblivious in the dark, his voice shrill and frantic. “Temu!” he cried. “Temuchin -- qamitha ayu ci?” *Where are you?*

He could feel Rhyden searching for him, his mind opened in full, his sight unencumbered. *Temu!* he cried, frightened. *Temu, where are you?* He called to Trejaeran, too, his voice filled with helpless despair, and Temu understood that Rhyden knew. He had heard Trejaeran screaming for him. He had likely felt Mongoljin’s presence, just as Temu and Yeb had, but had been too late to prevent what had happened. He was filled with anguish, screaming for Temu, pleading for Trejaeran to answer him. Everywhere, the shouts rang out, echoing against the slopes of the Ujugar. “Temuchin! Temu! Qamitha ayu ci?”

Aigiarn found him, even as the other ran past his huddled form. She did not say anything, but he knew she was there, standing behind him, even without opening his eyes. He heard the soft rustle of her clothing as she knelt in the dirt. He heard her breath flutter softly; he could feel the sudden, twisting, poignant pain in her heart as she saw Yeb’s body. She did not say anything for a long moment. She merely lay her hands against Temu, leaning over him, her long, dark hair draping about his face, sheltering him.

“Temuchin,” she breathed, pressing her lips against his ear. He felt her tears drop against his brow. “Temu...oyotona, come here.”

She drew him into her arms, and he did not resist her. She pressed his cheek against her shoulder, tilting her face so that he could feel her breath against his nose. She clutched him in her arms, rocking him gently, whispering to him. “It is alright,” she said, stroking his hair. “Oh, oyotona...Temu, it is alright.”

Aigiarn carried him back to the camp in her arms, as she had so many times when he had been younger. He was too big for her to handle easily now, but she did not

care. She cradled him against her chest, and she murmured to him the entire time she walked, shrugging her shoulder and refusing any help Toghrul or Rhyden offered.

She sat behind Temu before the campfire, holding him in her arms. Toghrul brought blankets from a nearby tent, wrapping the heavy folds around the boy. Rhyden knelt in front of Temu, cradling his face between his hands, checking the boy for injuries. "I can suture his leg," he said, raising his hips and reflexively reaching for the bogcu pouch at his waist. It was not there, and when he glanced at his hip, looking for his dagger, he realized the sheath was empty. He blinked at Aigiarn, confused.

Jobin took them, Temu whispered hesitantly in Rhyden's mind, drawing his gaze.

"What?" Rhyden breathed, leaning toward Temu, cupping the boy's cheek against his palm. "Jobin took my knife and bogcu?"

Temu nodded, his dark eyes enormous and haunted.

"Here," Toghrul said from behind Rhyden as he unfettered his own dagger from his sash. He tossed it against the ground beside Rhyden's leg. "Use mine. I have a sewing kit, too."

"Thank you, Toghrul," Rhyden said, glancing over his shoulder. He took the blade in hand and began to cut open Temu's blood-soaked pant leg. He met Temu's eyes.

Why did he take my knife?

Temu blinked at him dazedly. He was in a severe state of shock; he had withdrawn deep within himself. He had not spoken a word to anyone aloud. These were the first he had offered to Rhyden through his hiimori. Rhyden had been unable to sense the boy with his sight. It was as if the boy simply had vanished, and he realized Temu was doing it deliberately. He had withdrawn with his hiimori as well, shielding himself from the horror he had witnessed.

Because he thought he needed it, Temu whispered in Rhyden's mind after a moment.

And my bogcu? Rhyden asked. *Temu, why did Jobin take my bag?*

Temu blinked again, a faint glistening of tears in his eyes. *Because he knew you kept the anam'cladh inside,* he said.

Rhyden's breath drew still. *Temu, what has happened?* he asked. *What happened to Yeb? To Trejaeran? I sensed Mongoljin. I could hear Trejaeran screaming for me. Is he...is he...?*

He is gone, Temu whispered. *The anam'cladh pierced him.*

Rhyden gasped, drawing back from him, his eyes widening with shock.

"What...?"

A solitary tear trailed down Temu's cheek as the boy nodded. "I saw it," he whispered.

"We will strike the camp, make for the tunnels of Heese," Juchin said, pacing around the fire, his strides brisk, his fists closed, his mouth drawn in a stern line. "The earth tremor at the threshold knocked the gate loose of its moorings. We can pass now."

"Juchin, Tengerii boshig, give us until the morning," Toghrul said. He had been sitting beside Aigiarn, watching as Rhyden washed and tended to Temu's wounds, but stood now, his eyes flashing angrily.

"We cannot afford to wait until morning," Juchin replied, turning to face him. "When Jobin Dunster does not return to the Khahl by daybreak, I imagine they will ride upon us -- no more delays, no more waiting." He spared a glance at Rhyden and offered a polite nod. "Forgive me, Rhyden. I know he was a man known to your friend, but I think his actions tonight speak a story other than friendship to us."

"No, Juchin," Rhyden said softly. "No, you are right. He was a stranger to me, and I was too quick to trust him."

"The Khahl knew you would be -- the Tengri only know what they must have promised him in return for this deceit," Juchin said. "It is not your fault this has come to pass, lad. Do not believe for one moment that it is. Jobin Dunster meant to trick you and betray us -- to return to the Khahl, tell them of our numbers and our progress. Bugu Yeb must have seen him steal away from the camp and followed him. He attacked Yeb, stabbing him, but Yeb managed to strike back and leave him dead where he lies."

"Juchin, for the love of the Tengri, Temu is hurt," Toghrul said. "He has not spoken a word. His heart is broken! Bugu Yeb was beloved to him -- and to us. We must honor him with a pyre. We must -- "

“Keep moving, bahadur, unless we should all care to join bugu Yeb in the boughs of the spirit tree,” Juchin said, his brows narrowing. “Yeb knew the obligations upon him in the Negh’s quest. He embraced them, welcomed them. He chose to sacrifice himself willingly that Temuchin might continue on toward his destiny. Yeb will know eternal honor for his gift. There is no pyre we can build on this mortal plain, no songs we can sing, chants we could offer that will be greater than that he has already found. We will move on. We will strike the camp and enter Heese.”

“Yeb was your friend!” Toghrul shouted, stepping forward, his hands balled into fists. Tears gleamed in his eyes. “He was my friend! I will honor him as is his right among his people -- our people, Juchin! Will you mourn no one? Does no one’s loss move you?” He stared at Juchin, distraught. “You have known me since I was born. You bore me on your back when I was just a boy. If I fall, will you leave me to rot on the ground, as though I am nothing to your heart? Nothing among our people?”

Juchin met Toghrul’s gaze evenly. “I honored Yeb while he lived, bahadur,” he said. “I am sorry if you did not, and if your remorse for it brings you pain now that he is lost to us.”

“Both of you stop it,” Aigiarn snapped. She stared between them as she held her son, her eyes wide and aghast. “What is the matter with you? Has there not been enough pain tonight without adding more to it?” Her voice cracked, and she lowered her face, blinking against tears, her brows drawn. She stared down at Temu’s wounded leg for a long moment and then raised her eyes again, frowning. “We will strike the camp and enter Heese,” she said. “This land is unstable. We are lucky no more of us were hurt in these collapses. If more landslides come, they could cave in the baga’han mine tunnels and block the way to the lair. We cannot take that risk -- we have to hurry. We have to leave tonight.”

“Temu should not be walking with his leg...” Toghrul began, looking at her in disbelief.

“Then I will carry him,” Aigiarn said. “Juchin is right. Even if the Khahl had no part to play in what has happened tonight...” She glanced down at Temu, stroking her hand gently against his hair, her stern expression softening at the shock that still haunted his face. “...though I think they did somehow and Mongoljin has brought these landslides

upon us...they will be coming for us. We are near the lair now, and they know it. They are getting desperate and we have already given them too much time.” She turned to Juchin. “We will enter Heese. We will position Kelet among the ruins, archers to attack them from above when they try to follow us, and men armed with scimitars from below to engage them. They outnumber us, but we will have the advantage inside of Heese and we will be ready for them.”

She looked at Toghrul. “You and I will tend to Yeb together while the others strike the tent. We do not have time for a proper pyre, but we can see that he is shrouded, rituals offered for him. There is your compromise -- the both of you.”

Juchin nodded, lowering his eyes to the ground. “Teyimu, minu Khanum,” he said. *Yes, my Khanum.*

Toghrul nodded, but said nothing. He folded his arms across his chest and looked down at his feet, frowning.

Rhyden dismantled the tent where only hours earlier, he and Aigiarn had made love as though everything was right in the Bith. He wound a length of rope between his palm and elbow, realizing how naïve he had been; with Aigiarn beneath him, moving against him, it had all seemed so perfect to him, as if despite their circumstances, everything was precisely as it was meant to be, as he had always longed for it to be. He closed his eyes, his hands continuing his work, his body moving mechanically of its own accord without the consent or even awareness of his mind or heart.

And then reality came crashing down, he thought, feeling tears sting beneath his eyelids. *Hoah, did it ever -- in the form of mountainsides collapsing.*

Rhyden, he heard a soft voice whisper in his mind. He turned; Temu sat behind him, motionless, his dark eyes glazed and distant. The boy looked up at him, and then Rhyden felt a gust of wind rush against his face, tousling his hair. He closed his eyes, drawing his hand to his face reflexively and yelping. He felt something jerk at him, like an invisible hand closing against the front of his del and yanking him forward. He opened his eyes, and blinked, startled, stumbling.

The campsite was gone. He found himself alone with Temu in the pine forests where they had stopped for the night by Tolui Bay. Instead of graveled earth, his gutal

soles skittered against a carpeting of snow-crusted pine needles. Instead of the stink of dust and fallen stone, the fragrance of pine sap and sea salt met his nose. His eyes flew wide and he stared at Temu, realizing.

The jabsar, he thought. I am in the jabsar. Mother Above, Temu...he...

"I brought you here," Temu said quietly, looking down at his feet as if ashamed of himself. He stood directly in front of Rhyden. He glanced hesitantly at Rhyden and then back toward his gutal.

"How...?" Rhyden whispered, astonished and disbelieving. He knelt, placing his hand against Temu's shoulder to draw his gaze. "Temu, how did you bring me here?"

Temu shrugged slightly. "I do not know," he said. He blinked against a sheen of tears. "I just...I thought it, and you came. I did it before, with Nala." He hung his head again, his shoulders hunching. "I brought her to the jabsar. It is my fault she left us. I told her to. I knew she had made it so you and bugu Baichu did not hear the white-water. I knew she had tricked us, and I made her go away. Mongoljin killed her in the forest. I knew it, but I could not tell you or Yeb. I thought you would be angry with me."

Rhyden touched Temu's cheek. "Temu, I could never be angry with you."

Temu looked up at Rhyden, his eyes filled with sorrow. "It is my fault your friend, Aedhir Fainne died, too," he said. "I kept you from him. I did not mean to, but I did somehow. The shroud that has been over us...keeping you and...and Yeb from your hiimori...it is me. I am doing it. I blocked your sight. I kept you from reaching your friend." He blinked against tears and lowered his head. "It has been me all along. I...I love you and I did not want you to leave us."

Rhyden hooked his hand against the back of Temu's head and drew him near, embracing him. "Hoah, Temu, I would not have left you," he whispered. "I love you, too, lad. Do you not know? I would never leave you."

He hugged Temu for a long time as the boy shuddered against him. "I am sorry," Temu said. "It is my fault...!"

"No," Rhyden said, stroking his hand against Temu's hair. "No, it is not, Temu."

Temu nodded against Rhyden's shoulder, burying his face against Rhyden's del. "Yes, it is. I caused that -- all of it -- and then last night, I...I caused the landslides, too...!"

“What?” Rhyden asked, leaning back from him, his brows raised in surprise.

Temu nodded again. “Trejaeran showed me,” he said. “He told me I could move things with my mind like he could...like the dragons. He said my hiimori was different. He showed me how and I made the rocks in the tunnel move. I made the gate move out of our way. I did it, but then Trejaeran said the shroud was gone. I did not mean to, but I must have somehow. He sensed Yeb was in trouble and he went to help him. He sensed Mongoljin was hurting Yeb.”

He looked at Rhyden. “Mamma was right,” he whispered. “You knew it, did you not? You knew, but you did not tell her.”

“I dreamed of it,” Rhyden said, nodding. “I dreamed that I heard Trejaeran screaming for me. You did not tell Aigiarn, either.”

“Juchin thinks Jobin killed Yeb,” Temu said. “He thinks the landslides were caused by Golomto stirring beneath the mountains. The others listen to him. They think he is right.” He trembled as if a chill had passed through him. “They would be afraid if they knew.”

“If they knew what?” Rhyden asked.

Temu met his gaze. “How strong Mongoljin has become,” he whispered. “You know it. You felt it. I know you did. She is eating other shamans. She is eating their hiimori somehow, making it her own.” A tear spilled down his cheek, and his bottom lip trembled. “She...she took Yeb’s power and then Trejaeran’s. She hurt him. He told me it did not hurt to be dead, but he was screaming. She sent him to the qarang’qui. He is gone now, Rhyden, and it is all because of me. It is my fault.”

“Temu, no,” Rhyden said softly, and he took the boy in his arms, drawing him against his shoulder. Temu shuddered, bursting into tears, and Rhyden held him, stroking his hand against his hair. “No, Temu, it is not your fault.”

“Yeb is dead!” Temu cried, his voice muffled against Rhyden’s del. “He...he is dead, and Trejaeran is gone! She did it to stop us, to stop me from reaching the dragons!” He pulled away from Rhyden and stared at him, anguished. “Yeb is gone, and Trejaeran, and it is my fault.”

“No, it is not,” Rhyden said. “They are both still with us. Their spirits will always be with us. Yeb would never leave you, and Trejaeran would never leave me.”

“But she sent him to the qarang’qui,” Temu said, shuddering. “He is trapped there now. He can never leave, and it...it...”

“Temu, listen to me,” Rhyden said. “The qarang’qui cannot keep Trejaeran. Yeb told me that. He told me when Trejaeran came for him, his gerel pierced the darkness like daylight. The qarang’qui is not strong enough to hold him.”

“But she ran him through,” Temu said. “With the anam’cladh. I saw it, Rhyden -- I saw her stab him in the heart.”

“He cannot die, Temu,” Rhyden said gently. “Not again. Mongoljin might have weakened him, but he will grow strong again.” He smiled, brushing the cuff of his fingers against Temu’s cheek, catching the boy’s tears. “And when he does, he will tear that darkness open and come back to us. I know it, Temu. I can feel it.”

Temu blinked at him, sniffing. “I would feel it if he were gone,” Rhyden said. “I know I would. I would know it in my heart. I do not feel that, Temu. I cannot see him. I cannot speak to him, but I know he is not gone. I can still feel him in my heart.”

“Really?” Temu whispered, and Rhyden nodded.

“Sometimes love is so strong, Temu, that not even death can stop it. Sometimes a person’s spirit is so strong, so filled with love that they can defy death. They can defy the Tengri, the Good Mother...whatever waits for us when we die. Even if we cannot see them...even if we do not know they are with us, they always are. Trejaeran told me that. He is with us -- you and me, Temu, and so is Yeb.”

Temu trembled, new tears spilling. “I...I miss Yeb.”

Rhyden held him again, tucking the boy’s face against his shoulder. “I know you do. I...hoah, I miss him, too.”

“He was my friend,” Temu said. “I love him, Rhyden.”

“He knows, Temu,” Rhyden whispered. “I promise you, with all that I have, Yeb knows. He has always known.”

Temu stepped away from him, and Rhyden rose to his feet. The boy looked up at him. “She took Trejaeran’s hiimori to give to Targutai,” he said softly. “I heard her say that. She said Trejaeran’s gerel light is blue like mine, and she would give it to Targutai. They burned the Dologhon marks on him to look like mine, and maybe with Trejaeran’s gerel, the dragons will think he is me. Maybe they will come for him.”

“I do not think they would be so easily fooled, Temu.”

Temu looked down at the ground. “Maybe I want them to be,” he whispered. “I want to go to Tiralainn with you and Mamma. Please, Rhyden. I do not want to be the Negh anymore.”

“Alright,” Rhyden said quietly, nodding. “If that is what you want, Temu, we will do it.”

“It is what you want, too!” Temu cried. “You and Mamma -- you both want it. I know! I can feel it! You want to leave here -- you want us to be a family! You have never wanted anything for yourself -- I can see that in your mind -- but you want that. Targutai wants the dragons more than I do -- more than I ever have. He feels like he deserves them, that they belong to him and maybe he is right. Maybe I should just let him have them. They do not care about us -- Targutai, Mongoljin, none of the Khahl. She killed Yeb and took Trejaeran’s gerel because of the dragons. They want Targutai to be the Negh. Maybe I should just let him.”

Rhyden did not say anything. Temu turned and walked away. “Why did you fight Lahnduren?” Temu asked at length. He paused, looking over his shoulder at Rhyden. “He wanted to be king. He felt like it belonged to him; it should be his. It was his birthright. I can see that in your mind, your memories. He tried so hard to be king, to claim the throne. Why did you stop him?”

“Because he was cruel,” Rhyden said. “He did want to be king, Temu, and maybe he did deserve the crown by birthright, but that did not mean he should have claimed it. He would have hurt my people if he had ever taken the throne. He would have brought great suffering to my land.”

Temu looked puzzled, and Rhyden walked toward him. “Sometimes, Temu, simply wanting something, or being born entitled to it does not make it deserved or right. Lahnduren was King of Tiralainn for a long time, and he did terrible things to his people. He hurt them, enslaved them, murdered them.”

“That is what Targutai has done,” Temu said. “Targutai and all of the Khahl Kagans. They hurt our people -- not just the Oirat, but the Khahl, too, the poor ones. They go hungry, just like we do. He lets the empire take them for slaves, just like us.”

“I have always tried to believe that the right course to follow is the one which leads to the greatest good for all,” Rhyden said. “I do not know if that philosophy has served me well or not. Sometimes it has. Sometimes it has only brought me loss and sorrow.”

Temu looked at him, and Rhyden draped his hand against the boy’s shoulder. “You are right, Temu. I do want to be with you and your mother -- a family. It would be easy for us to leave, to just turn around and go back to the sea, to Tiralainn. But sometimes, the right thing to do is not what is easiest. Sometimes it is the hardest, in fact. Sometimes it means we have to make sacrifices...we have to hurt, because it means it keeps other people from being hurt.”

He genuflected before Temu, looking up to meet the boy’s gaze. “I think that is what gives someone the right to be a king,” he said. “A Kagan, the Negh...any leader. They understand that sometimes they have to suffer, because if they do, it keeps other people from suffering in their stead. It is not something you are born to, Temu. It is something you feel in your heart. It is simply a part of you.”

Temu blinked at him, quiet for a long moment. “What do you think I should do, Rhyden?”

Rhyden touched his face, cupping his palm against his cheek. “What you feel is right in your heart, Temu,” he said. “You cannot expect any more of yourself than this...but you cannot ask any less, either.”

“Ci ocigqu ene kelberi, ene lagsin bide medeku ayu nokur,” Toghrul sang, his voice soft. *You leave this form, this body we know as friend...* “Nisku ogere olqu mongke modun, sula sunesu ugei seguder, giyaliqu imagta.” *Fly upwards to find the eternal tree, free soul without shadow, to shine always.*

He draped his hand against Yeb’s shroud-covered face, his brows lifting in sorrow. “Bide uyilaqu ugei ci,” he sang. *We weep without you.* “Manu nilbusun, manu gaslang qocaraqu ci getulku, ba bide jirgaqu kuliyeke ci qariqu.” *Our tears, our grief to remain behind you will pass, and we rejoice to wait for your return.*

He raised his eyes and found Aigiarn looking at him. She was smiling at him, despite the sheen of tears in her eyes. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head, looking down at Yeb. “I just...I do not believe I have ever heard you sing before. You have a lovely voice.”

“I...I suppose I have not had much cause to sing,” he said. They had folded Yeb’s hands across his chest before swathing the wool blankets about him, and Toghrul could see the outline of the shaman’s fingers through the wool. He brushed his fingertips lightly against Yeb’s.

“Thank you, Toghrul,” Aigiarn said quietly. He looked at her, his brow raised, and she stroked her hand against Yeb’s shoulder. “For helping me do this.” She met his gaze. “I do not think I could have without you.”

“He was my friend,” Toghrul said. “Juchin was right...maybe I did not always show him that he was, and maybe he and I did not always see things in the same way, but he cared for you. He was good to Temu. He was a good man, and I always respected him for that.”

“He always respected you for the same reasons,” she said, and Toghrul looked away, uncertain of what to say.

“He was like a mountain to me,” Aigiarn whispered. He glanced at her, and saw her tears had begun to spill. “Of all that has happened to us...and all of the people I have had to say good-bye to, I...I never thought I would have to say it to Yeb.” She blinked at Toghrul, her eyes round and anguished. “He was a mountain,” she whispered. “He was my mountain, Toghrul.”

She folded herself over Yeb’s body, her shoulders trembling as she wept. The measure of Toghrul’s heart that still loved her wanted to go to her so badly; the muscles in his legs strained with the need to unfurl, to rush to her side, but he did not move. *Maybe you simply needed to realize that you were both meant to be something else to one another,* Yeb had told him, and Toghrul knew he was right. He could no longer be Aigiarn’s lover, but he could be something else to her, something that had never been forced between them -- a friend. He moved his hand, hooking his fingers against hers, feeling her clutch at him.

“Yeb is with you, Aigiarn,” he said. “His form is gone to us, but not his spirit. Not his wisdom or his guidance -- or his love. He told me sometimes what seems to be an ending is really a beginning in disguise. Maybe that is what this is.”

She looked up at him, her disheveled hair clinging to her damp cheeks. “Yeb told you that?”

Toghrul nodded. “Tonight, as a matter of fact,” he said. “He told me that tonight.”

Aigiarn gazed down at Yeb’s shrouded face. She brushed her fingertips against the outline of his cheek and managed a soft laugh. “Riddles and analogies,” she whispered. “I might have known you would leave us with one or the other.”

“You are finished, then? Ready?” Juchin asked as Aigiarn and Toghrul walked back to the campsite together. They had built an *obuga* along the base of the Ujugar cliffs facing the channel of the Okin River, a pile of stones under which they had lain Yeb’s form to rest in a tranquil place Aigiarn had thought he might have appreciated.

Toghrul was still on sore terms with Juchin but before he could open his mouth and offer a sharp retort, Aigiarn said, “Yes, Juchin. We are finished.”

“Good,” Juchin said, nodding. “The bergelmirs are loaded, the tents and blankets bundled.”

“We should go,” Aigiarn said, and Juchin nodded again. She looked around. “Where is Temu? Let me get him. He can ride on my back. We can -- ”

“I will walk,” Temu said from behind them. He and Rhyden walked abreast of one another. Rhyden carried his rolled tent slung across his shoulders; Temu carried a bundled pile of blankets between his arms, limping on his bandaged leg. He met his mother’s gaze as they drew near. “I can walk.”

Aigiarn glanced at Rhyden, surprised to discover Temu recovered from his dazed, stupefied shock so quickly. “Alright, oyotona,” she said. “If you are sure you can make it...?”

“I am sure,” Temu replied, walking past her. “It is mine to finish, and I will see it through.”

“What did you say to him?” Aigiarn asked Rhyden, hooking her hand against his sleeve, drawing him back a step. She cut her eyes to Temu, watching him load the blankets onto the saddle of a bergelmir.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“He is alright,” she said. “Twenty minutes ago, he would not say a word. I tried and tried but he would not even look at me. He would not blink if you snapped your fingers in front of his face, and now, he...he is...” She looked up at Rhyden. “What did you say to him?”

“Nothing he did not already know,” Rhyden told her with a smile. He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the mouth. “He did not need me to.”

She watched Rhyden follow Temu toward the bergelmir. Temu reached up, helping Rhyden lower the heavy bundle of wool and bracing shafts from his shoulder, and then they began to fether the tent against the bergelmir’s rump together.

Sometimes, Aigiarn, you have to be the water, not the sword, she imagined Yeb saying within her mind. For a moment, she could nearly hear him, as though he only stood over her shoulder, speaking softly against her ear, and she closed her eyes, smiling.

“Bayarlaa, Yeb,” she whispered. *Thank you.*

Chapter Five

“Mongoljin, you cannot just abandon my body by the river,” Yisun said as she ducked through Mongoljin’s tent flap. She had not bothered to announce herself. It was the middle of the night; she was still more asleep than awake; she had only just heard the news among the Minghan and she was furious. Sentries had found Mongoljin crumpled along the edge of the Okin River sometime after midnight. Mongoljin had been moaning, stirring weakly, and her soft cries had alerted the Minghan as they had patrolled the perimeter of the Khahl’s campsite.

Mongoljin seemed fine at the moment as she stood inside her tent, looking at Yisun with smooth, black eyes that showed no fatigue despite the late hour, and expressed no emotion whatsoever. Mongoljin had dressed Yisun’s form in fur lined, ivory hide clothes, and she folded Yisun’s arms across her bosom, raising Yisun’s brow as if incensed by her audacious and unexpected entrance.

Yisun paused, unnerved by Mongoljin’s cool reception, and all at once dismayed by the burst of enraged energy that had prompted her intrusion. She lowered her face to the ground and blinked at her gutal. It was certainly not a reaction suitable for a proper Khahl woman of noble birth, and a rather foolhardy endeavor in retrospect, given Mongoljin’s power. “I...I mean there have been earth tremors, Qatun’Eke,” she said. “We heard them rumbling in the distance, trembling in the ground. The cliffs might have collapsed. The stones might have damaged my body.”

She glanced up. Mongoljin arched her brow all the more, but said nothing. Yisun felt hot, bright patches of abashed color stoke in her cheeks, and she hung her head again. “I...I would...that is, Great Mother, I only mean that you might -- ”

Her voice cut off abruptly, ending in a sharp, gargled sound. It felt as though an invisible hand had just seized her by the throat, clamping against her windpipe, and she staggered, her eyes flying wide. She pawed at the open air in front of neck, flapping vainly at whatever unseen force throttled her.

“It seems there has been a misunderstanding between us, Yisun Goyaljin,” Mongoljin said, walking slowly toward her. “One that I now see is well overdue for

clarification. *That* is your form..." At the word *that*, the stranglehold on Yisun's throat tightened, wrenching a breathless cry from her. "You tucked yourself within it of your own choosing, abandoning this one of your own free will. It is mine now."

Yisun blinked at her, stricken, hiccupping for breath. "You..." she wheezed. "You...cannot...!"

"You have not told Targutai who you are," Mongoljin said. "Though you have been tempted. I can see it in your mind. I have felt your indecision." She paused, smiling at Yisun with her own delicate mouth. "It is good that you have said nothing. It would be too confusing for him. Of course you understand this. He knows I am not his mother, and yet I wear her form. Something within him identifies with this. I can sense it about him. It would only perplex him -- me in the form of Yisun Goyaljin, and you in the guise of Khidyr Striagal. A man's heart and mind can only be taxed so far before it simply gives up. You know this, Yisun. You are a first-born Manchu daughter -- no stranger to the ignorance of men."

She leaned toward Yisun, her brows narrowing, the invisible hand about Yisun's throat clamping all the tighter. "It is only by this merit that I have allowed you to live as long as you have," she hissed, her black eyes sparkling. "I now see that this, too, demands some clarification."

Yisun gasped in helpless, horrified realization, shrugging her shoulders, struggling. "No...!" she gagged. "You...you cannot...! Targutai...he...he needs me...!"

"Targutai needs his mother," Mongoljin said.

"I...I am his mother!" Yisun wheezed.

"And you have guided him well in the time he has been yours," Mongoljin said, nodding once. "You have prepared him as best as you have been able, led him as far as you ever might have hoped to, Manchu daughter. Now he needs gifts you cannot give him. Now he must be led in directions you cannot follow. It is for the good of the kingdom -- and the Kahl. You have loved Targutai little more than a decade. I have loved him and waited for him for millennia. Which of us is better suited to call him son?"

"Please..." Yisun whimpered, shaking her head as Mongoljin raised her hand. She had heard the whispered rumors of what Mongoljin had done to Khidyr's shamans. The Minghan who had accompanied her had told stories of each shaman in turn

ducking into Mongoljin's tent in the late hours of the night, only to never leave. She would leave their bodies crumpled on the ground, their faces frozen in grotesque masks of absolute, mindless terror. "Please...wait...!"

"The false one has awakened," Mongoljin said. "His powers are nearly upon him in full." She spread her fingers, opening her hand at Yisun. As she did, the ongon about Yisun's neck, the totem Khidyr had given her to bind her ami inside of Khidyr's form, snapped loose, the tether of sinew holding it in place breaking. It flew into Mongoljin's awaiting hand, and without it, the spell was broken and Yisun's ami was wrenched from her body. She collapsed to the ground, dead.

"There is no time to wait," Mongoljin whispered, closing her hand about the ongon, crushing it.

"Mongoljin, I heard the Minghan saying -- " Targutai began, marching across the tent threshold, shoving aside the wool flap. Yisun had not been dead a full minute, and he blinked down at her crumpled form, his eyes widening.

Like Yisun, Targutai had been roused from his pallet by the sounds of the landslides, and the rumors of Mongoljin's discovery. He had been worried for her. Mongoljin had told Yisun the truth; though Targutai understood she was not his mother, the mere fact that she wore Yisun's form was enough to keep him perplexed, if not somewhat endeared to her. Mongoljin could sense this within him, and the corner of her mouth lifted in a slight, pleased smile.

His brows narrowed and he frowned as he looked up at her. "Khidyr is dead," he said, a statement of fact, not inquiry.

"Yes, my Kagan," Mongoljin said, lowering her face in polite deference.

Targutai closed his hands into fists, his frown deepening. "Must you keep killing off my bloody damn people?" he cried.

She met his gaze and arched her brow. "Must you keep speaking in the vulgar slang of the Torachan empire?" she said. "You are the sacred son of the seven, Targutai, the Negh whose birth was promised to your people millennia ago, the rebuilders of your ancestor's mighty empire. You are standing on the threshold of your destiny, your people's destiny, and you -- "

“What I am standing on is the threshold of your rot damn tent,” Targutai snapped. “And my people will not have any destiny if you do not stop killing them all! What is the matter with you? Khidyr was my idugan -- my highest counsel! She was -- ”

“No longer of any use to you, my Kagan,” Mongoljin interjected mildly, and he blinked at her, startled. She stepped toward him, reaching out and brushing her fingertips gently beneath his chin. “Khidyr has led you as far as her limited capacities would allow and the benefit of her hiimori to you has passed. She has deceived you in this journey. I am the one who has told you the truth of the false one’s endeavors...the power of the Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun and his endur utha. Khidyr kept these hidden from you. She did so with only your interests in mind, but her failure has only served to hinder you in your course. You have no need of her anymore.”

“Really now?” Targutai asked, shrugging away from her, glaring. He was not impressed so far with Mongoljin. She could sense this readily about him -- much to her amusement. Nothing Mongoljin had accomplished so far had been as much of merit or interest in his opinion as the bouncing of Khidyr’s bosom as she had ridden her bergelmir.

“And I suppose I should rely upon your hiimori now?” Targutai asked. “You have done so much for us -- you have learned the way to the lair. Rot bit of good that does us now, considering we have been following the damn Oirat there for weeks. You have abandoned my mother’s form, left her slumped along the riverbank all night long so ikhama could come and sniff at her -- my mother, the Qatun’Eke, no better than a dead burlagh. This, too, has served us greatly, I am sure.”

“You should not have to rely upon my hiimori, either, my Kagan,” Mongoljin told him.

“With my last shaman gone, what other choice do I have?” Targutai asked.

“You do have a choice, my Kagan,” Mongoljin said. “I have brought you a choice.” He looked at her, his scowl shifting to a bewildered frown, and she smiled. “I did leave my form, this is true. I went among the Oirat. I sensed the manang that has protected them had fallen, and I seized advantage of it. I felt Jobin Dunster returning to us, just as I had told you he would -- successful in his efforts.”

“That spirit sword you told me about,” Targutai said. “The one the Elf carries. Jobin brought it to you?”

“No, Targutai,” Mongoljin said softly, reaching into the pouch of her bogcu and drawing the anam’cladh hilt out against her palm. “He brought it to you.”

She curled her hand about the hilt, and Targutai recoiled, his eyes flying wide in start as the black blade hissed into life above the tang. After an uncertain moment, he stepped forward, his alarm waning into fascination, his mouth unfurling into a wondrous smile. “Tengerii boshig...!” he whispered.

“There is more than this,” Mongoljin said, drawing his gaze. “The false one’s power has grown. He attacked me and I fought against him. That is why the mountains collapsed -- and why your Minghan found me in such a state on the riverbank.”

“It is not his power,” Targutai said, frowning again. “It is mine. It has always been mine -- all of this. The Tengri cheated me. They cheat me still. He has stolen my power!”

“Yes,” Monogljjin purred. “And I have brought it back to you.”

Targutai’s mouth snapped shut and he blinked at her. “I have defeated the Oirat’s endur, the utha suld of Rhyden Fabhcun,” she said. “He will trouble you no more, my Kagan. His passing has left you a marvelous gift -- one the Tengri meant for you all along, but that the Oirat stole for the false one.”

“What?” Targutai asked. “What do you mean?”

“His gerel, my Kagan -- the endur’s spirit glow -- is blue like the false one’s. His shamans summoned great hiimori to strip it from you at birth, to instill it -- and your rightful powers -- within the false one’s form. The endur knew similar powers, the same gerel. I have stripped these from him. I will give them to you. You will stand before the dragons with the mark of the Seven upon your breast, and the blue gerel of the Negh’s soul, and they will know you.”

“You...you are going to give me the endur’s gerel?” Targutai asked. “And his power? But I...I do not understand.” He frowned, suspicious. “I do not have any hiimori.”

“Not yet,” Mongoljin told him, with a smile. “But you will, Targutai. You will be mightier than one thousand Khidyrs -- with all of her shamans combined. You will be stronger than Rhyden Fabhcun. You will be stronger than the false one.”

“Will I be stronger than you, Mongoljin?” he asked, raising his brow.

Mongoljin’s smile broadened; here was the relentless, calculating streak within him that was his birthright as Duua’s heir. “Perhaps,” she murmured, touching Targutai’s face fondly. “But you will still have need of me. It is power that will be mighty within you - but unfamiliar, yet the same. I can teach you to command it.”

“You will show me how to use it?” he asked. “You will show me how to defeat Temuchin Arightei with it?”

“I will do far more than this, Targutai,” she said, leaning toward him. She cradled his face between his hands and let her lips brush against his, her mouth aglow with the pale, blue light of Trejaeran’s power. “I will show you how to destroy him.”

When Targutai emerged from Mongoljin’s tent, the cold saliva of her kiss still damp against his lips, the bitter flavor of her mouth still lingering against his tongue, he saw the world through a new set of eyes. He could still see as he always had; here was Megetu walking toward him, and over there, the Minghan loitering about, muttering anxiously to one another. However, it was as though everything around him suddenly had a sort of overlay; what he saw with his eyes, he perceived simultaneously within his mind, and here, the Bith was a place of colors and shadows. Megetu was cast in a pale, iridescent shade of green. Indeed, all of the Khahl warriors at their encampment were aglow with green light. Of them all, only Targutai and Mongoljin had any other hue. Mongoljin was black, her form surrounded by deep shadows, as if light feared to draw too near to her. Targutai was blue, a delicate, luminous azure glow surrounding his body from head to toe, like some sort of shimmering, unearthly sheath.

It is hiimori, he thought, ignoring Megetu completely in his approach. He held his hands out in front of him, staring in wonder at his palms. *These are gerels -- spirit glows. Mongoljin was right. I can see them now. The endur’s hiimori is mine.*

He glanced up and found Megetu standing before him, a perplexed and somewhat worried expression pinching his face. “What?” Targutai asked, frowning at the interruption.

Megetu caught one of Targutai's hands against his own and peered at it in the dim glow from a nearby campfire, as if checking for injuries. Targutai jerked away from him, stumbling back a step. "What are you doing?" he said. "Stop that."

Megetu blinked at him, puzzled all the more. *You were looking at your hands*, he said, reaching for him. *I thought you were hurt*.

"I am not hurt," Targutai snapped. "Leave me..." His voice faded as he realized that he had not heard the eunuch speak aloud; in fact, Megetu had not even opened his mouth. Targutai had heard him inside of his mind -- he had heard Megetu's thoughts.

"Hiimori," he whispered, amazed anew. His mouth spread in a broad grin and he beamed at Megetu. "I heard your thoughts!" he exclaimed. "I heard them in my head -- Mongoljin was right! Hold still, Megetu. Think something else. Let me do it again. Think of something."

Of what? Megetu asked, baffled.

"I do not know," Targutai said, aggravated and oblivious to the fact it had just happened again. "Anything! What goes on in that stupid, half-rotted, misbegotten, lump skull of yours ordinarily?"

I...I do not know, Megetu said. *Sometimes I think of my youngest brother, Subetei. He remained among the Minghan in my stead as Bahadur at the palace, and I wonder if he is --*

"I do not care about your bloody damn brother!" Targutai snapped, flapping his hands at Megetu. "Just think of something. Do it!"

He looked up at the eunuch and it felt like he bumped into an invisible stone wall. It was a tangible enough sensation that he stumbled back a step in surprise, and his shoulders smacked into Mongoljin. "Eunuchs think nothing of consequence to anyone," she said, and as her black eyes leveled at Megetu, he drew back, lowering his gaze to the ground. "Much less themselves. Do not waste your gifts, my Kagan."

Targutai shrugged away from her as she tried to drape her hands against his shoulders. "You are right," he said, and he glowered at Megetu. "There is a body inside of Mongoljin's tent. Go and drag it down to the riverbank. Leave it for the ikhama to find."

Megetu nodded and walked toward the tent. He drew aside the flap and leaned inside, promptly turning back to Targutai, his eyes flown wide in shock. “Khidyr...!”

“Drag her down to the riverbank,” Targutai said. “Do not stand there gawking at me. Do as I tell you.”

Megetu straightened his shoulders, letting the tent flap fall closed. He stared at Targutai, his face twisted with unexpected anguish. “But she was your shaman.”

“I do not need a shaman anymore, you squealing peahen,” Targutai snapped, closing his hands into fists. “I have Mongoljin now to guide me and she has given me power of my own, power I deserve as the sacred son of the seven.”

He did not understand why Megetu looked so stricken. The eunuch and the idugan had been acquainted for many long years, of course, but Targutai had never gleaned the impression their relationship extended into any sort of endeared friendship. Megetu looked on the verge of tears, like a toddler struggling not to weep, as though he had discovered the body of someone beloved to him. Targutai’s furrowed brows softened with this realization.

“What is it?” he asked. “Her usefulness to me was gone. I cannot bog myself down with those who bring me no benefit. This is my destiny we are riding toward -- and Khidyr lied to me. She thought it would serve me, but it has only hindered me -- delays I can no longer afford.”

Megetu blinked at him. A tear rolled down his cheek, and he hung his head. Targutai again tried to sense his thoughts. He did not know how he had done it to begin with, and again there was nothing but that peculiar sensation of smacking against a wall. “...your...your mother...” Megetu said softly.

“Yes, I know she was dear to my mother,” Targutai said. “Mother will have to learn to cope with it. I am sure she will manage once we have all returned to Kharhorin astride my dragons.” He pointed to Mongoljin’s tent. “Move Khidyr’s body down by the river and leave it there. No dawdling either. We are riding again -- this camp will be struck and we will be underway in less than an hour.”

He turned and tromped away, closing his hands into fists. He missed the fleeting moment where Megetu raised his eyes from his gutal toes, settling his gaze upon Mongoljin’s, his brows narrowing with menacing intent.

“Do not tempt me, eunuch -- lest you join her,” Mongoljin told him, and he looked away again, a surly but cowed dog.

“Neikun, call to my men!” Targutai declared, marching through the center of the Minghan encampment and spying the chieftain by a large campfire. “I want every Minghan on his feet and working! I want these tents down and bundled. I want bergelmirs saddled and all of us prepared to ride!”

“My Kagan?” Neikun said, blinking at him. He had only recently roused from his tent, disturbed by the earth tremors. He was still somewhat bleary-eyed, his long hair disheveled.

Targutai frowned, coming to a halt nearly toe-to-toe with the man. He hoisted his chin proudly, his brows drawn. “Have you gone deaf, Neikun?”

“No, my Kagan,” Neikun said, bewildered, shaking his head.

Targutai arched his brow. “Good,” he said. “Then call to my men. See it done right now.”

He turned to stomp off again, Mongoljin trailing behind him like an ivory-shrouded shadow. Neikun’s hesitant voice gave him pause.

“My Kagan, do you...do you think it is wise?” he asked. “To ride the night through, I mean. The mountains have been collapsing...the earth trembling. Golotmo is stirring, and she is displeased.”

“If I were you, Neikun, I would worry less about Golotmo’s displeasure and more about mine,” Targutai said, turning to glare over his shoulder. “Do as you are told.”

“But my Kagan,” Neikun offered, stepping forward, raising his hands. “The cliffs here are unstable. If they should fall on us as we pass, our ranks could be decimated. We will not be able to see the debris well in the dark. By the light of even the dimmest new morning, my Kagan, we could more readily see if any rubble is safe to cross, or plot our way around by way of the river shallows to sturdier -- ”

Targutai furrowed his brows and Neikun flew backwards, his feet wrenched from beneath him. He uttered a sharp, startled squawk and then grunted in breathless pain as he slammed into the cliff wall behind him. He crumpled onto his hands and knees,

gasping for air. The Minghan abruptly lapsed into stunned silence, and they blinked in uncertain alarm between the chieftain and their Kagan.

“By morning, the Oirat and the false one will be nearly halfway to the lair, Neikun,” Targutai said. “These landslides that have stoked your cowardice have only prodded them forward. They will fear the *baga’han* tunnels will collapse and will leave tonight for the mines, if they have not already. You would see this? You would see the false one reach the dragons first?”

Neikun shook his head, visibly shaken and frightened. He had no idea what had just happened to him. Frankly, Targutai did not, either, but he was angry, and he could feel this new power within him simmering. He could feel it within him and he meant to use it.

“No, my Kagan,” Neikun said hoarsely, and all at once, Targutai could see inside of his mind. More than hearing his thoughts, it was as if Targutai and Neikun had suddenly traded forms; all of the noyan’s feelings, thoughts and memories were instantaneously and in full realized by the young Kagan.

At this, he blinked at Neikun, raising his brow. “You *would* see that, would you not?” he hissed, stepping forward, balling his hands into fists. “You doubt me, Neikun.”

Neikun stared at him in bright horror, all of the color draining from his face. “No,” he whispered, shaking his head again. “No, my Kagan, I...I serve you loyally. I do not doubt you.”

“You doubt I am the rightful heir,” Targutai said. “You doubt I am the Negh. You wonder if Temuchin Arightei is entitled to the lair.”

“No,” Neikun said. “No, my Kagan, that...that is not -- ”

“You...you and your kin -- even your Minghan among you in my service -- you have all spoken of it!” Targutai cried. “You think the Tengri have shown favor to him. You think perhaps our ancestors were wrong, our legends made of lies. You think the Tengri would leave the dragons and our empire to an Oirat bastard whelp who has faked my marks upon his breast and used his shamans to steal my falcon, my rot damn gerel!”

He whirled about, glaring at the Minghan, and the soldiers shied away from his fierce gaze, lowering their eyes in sudden shame.

“How dare you doubt me!” Targutai cried. “Any of you -- how dare you doubt me! I am the chosen son of the stars! I am He Who Shall Pass! I bear the celestial crown upon my heart -- I am the promise of five thousand years and ten fold as many lifetimes!”

He turned to Neikun, trembling with rage. “You would turn against me? Your tribe once rode the black dragons for my ancestors, the might Kagan’Ekes Borjigidal and Duua! By that legacy, you should be as dear to me as kin, and you betray me for the false one? Your heart is so easily swayed by shaman trickery?”

“I...I could never...would never doubt you, my Kagan,” Neikun said, rising to his feet, stumbling in place. “I...I honor you. I -- ”

“Your mouth honors me,” Targutai hissed. “Your tongue wags with lies. I see into your heart now, Neikun. You keep no secrets from me here. You stood against me at the Uru’ut raid -- you whined and simpered about our journey, our attack. I thought your hesitation was softness; your uncertainties, cowardice, but now I understand. You do not believe I am the Negh. You have never believed it. And you have poisoned your men against me.”

Neikun opened his mouth to speak, to plead again, and Targutai thrust his hand forward, his fingers hooked into claws. Neikun sailed backward again, crying out in terror, his voice *whoofing* into silence as again, he smashed into the granite. Targutai opened his fingers, splaying them wide, and instead of collapsing to the ground, Neikun remained pinned against the cliffside nearly fifteen feet off the ground. His arms and legs sprawled just like Targutai’s fingers, and he uttered a shrill, frightened cry as he struggled vainly against invisible bonds.

The Minghan recoiled, drawing away in a broad circumference, their eyes enormous and fearful in the firelight. Targutai could hear them whispering in alarm and confusion; both their minds and their mouths yammered like a stirred hive of hornets. They glowed to his gaze, huddled clusters of iridescent green as they cowered together.

“Do you doubt me now, Neikun?” Targutai asked, walking toward the noyan, holding his hand outstretched.

Neikun whimpered, shaking his head, his lips quivering, his eyes filled with terror. “N-no...!” he gasped. “No, I...I swear it...I...”

Targutai canted his face at an angle, raising his brows in near sympathy. “Even now, you would lie to me?” he said, and he drew his hand back sharply. Neikun crashed to the ground, crying feebly, and the Minghan recoiled all the more.

Targutai thrust his hand forward again, and Neikun flew off of the ground as if he had been snatched back on a fishing line. He smashed into the mountainside, the back of his skull cracking hard enough to send a spray of blood flying from his nose. Again, Targutai lowered his hand; again, Neikun crumpled. Again, Targutai’s hand shot out, and again, Neikun was battered against the wall.

Targutai slammed Neikun into the wall until his cries had waned into silence; until every sound in the camp, from the murmured voices of the frightened Minghan, to the restless flutter of their thoughts within Targutai’s mind had fallen still. He hurtled Neikun like a toddler throwing a tantrum might pitch unwanted toys at a wall. Again and again, he bashed Neikun’s form into the rocks, until his arms and legs flapped limply, helplessly in the air as he flew, until his head rocked and bobbed on his shattered neck like a dried leaf caught on the edge of a wind gust. He battered Neikun in the rocks until Neikun was unrecognizable; his face smeared with blood, his hair matted with spongy brain matter, his fractured skull misshapen and lopsided. Targutai watched the bloodstains on the cliff wall grow darker and broader with every violent shove; he watched them as black shadows across the backdrop of bright, blinding blue light that had suddenly filled his entire gaze.

“Do you doubt me now?” he screamed over and over, spittle flying from his lips, unaware that he shrieked himself hoarse. “Do you doubt me now?”

“My Kagan,” Mongoljin said softly, draping her hand against his shoulder. “That is enough.” At her touch, her quiet voice, it was as if a line drawn between Targutai and Neikun had been severed. Targutai staggered, blinking owlshly as though he stumbled from a dream. Neikun collapsed one last time to the ground and lay still, blood pooling in a slow, widening circumference about his ruined head.

Targutai turned and found Mongoljin smiling at him. She was pleased, proud of him. He could sense it radiating from her like heat. He had wielded his power; she had not needed to show him how. His rage had channeled it, focused it, and through his fury, it had been as instinct for him to command it. He felt her hand slip against his, and

then she pressed something against his palm. He looked down and found the hilt of the spirit sword -- the anam'cladh -- cradled against his hand.

It is yours now, Mongoljin told him. It has always been meant for your hand. You have proven yourself tonight.

Targutai turned away and looked among the Minghan. "Does any other man here dare to doubt me?" he shouted. He began to walk in a broad circle; with every step, the Minghan drew back from him, wide-eyed and frightened. "Do any dare?"

He whirled to them, standing with his back to the fire. He closed his hand about the anam'cladh hilt, and a blinding spear of blue fire seared above the silver tang. The Minghan cried out in overlapping, startled yelps, shying away, drawing their hands toward their faces against the blazing glare.

"I am the Negh!" Targutai cried, raising the anam'cladh above his head. "Mark it - all of you -- and mark it well! I am the sacred son of the indomitable Duua! I will lead us to triumph and see our enemies brought to their knees! I am the rightful heir of ancient prophecy whose birth and destiny were promised by the whispered breaths of our ancestors! I bear the mark of the Seven, and I shall pass! I am the Negh -- in form, spirit and power! Who here will dare turn his heart, mind or mouth against me?"

No one answered. One by one, the Minghan began to fall to their knees, prostrating themselves before Targutai. Two hundred men genuflected before him, shoving their fists against their breasts and lowering their heads in collective deference.

Targutai looked across the campsite and saw Megetu approaching from the direction of the riverbank. The eunuch blinked at him, startled by the sight of the flaming sword, and then, as he realized what the other Minghan were doing, he sank to his knees, too. There was no accounting for the sudden, poignant sorrow in Megetu's face, and Targutai could not read his mind. Whatever he had done to harness his power against Neikun, it had left him feeling weak inside, too feeble for even this effort.

He turned toward Mongoljin and found she still smiled at him. She canted her face toward the ground, and then she genuflected along with the men, pressing her hand against her heart. *My Kagan*, she said within his mind. *My Negh*.

"I...I do not feel well," Targutai said to Mongoljin. The two rode side by side on their bergelmirs as the Khahl headed east along the shores of the Okin River. Nearly two hours had passed since they had abandoned their camp, and Targutai had kept hoping the feeling of weakness, the frailty that had seized him after he had wielded his power against Neikun would pass. It had not, and he pressed his palm against his brow, wincing. "Mongoljin, what is the matter with me?"

"It will pass," Mongoljin said. "You have expended your strength, but it will restore. You will need it when we reach the baga'han city. You must try to rest, my Kagan."

They had found evidence of tremendous landslides the further eastward they ventured. In places along the base of the Ujugar cliffs, it looked like an enormous fist had plowed a path through the rubble, throwing boulders and shattered tons of granite aside in a broad furrow. The Minghan were curious and awestruck by this. They murmured among themselves as they gawked about them, their eyes wide with wonder.

"Did you do this?" Targutai asked Mongoljin, craning his head back to look up at one towering slope of debris. Some immense force had shoved earth and stone against the cliff wall, as if it had been forced aside by powerful winds, or the edge of a massive wave.

Mongoljin did not turn her eyes from ahead of her. "Yes, when I unleashed my powers against the false one."

Targutai blinked at her in wonder. Megetu rode to his left. As Mongoljin spoke, Megetu glanced at her, his brows drawn, his mouth turned in a dubious frown. "Did it not weaken you, Mongoljin?" Targutai asked. "Turning your powers against him like that?"

The corner of her mouth lifted, but again, she did not avert my gaze. "Somewhat, my Kagan," she said. "But not enough to be of any consequence."

One of the Minghan riders ahead of them let out a sharp cry, and Targutai turned, following the sound. "The scouts have found something." He kicked his guta heel against his bergelmir's loin, spurring the animal forward. "Megetu, you are with me. Come on!"

He and the eunuch reined their weasels to the front of the ranks. Here, a group of riders had gathered, their bergelmirs drawn to halts. They had dismounted, and stood in a cluster near a pile of rubble, looking down at the ground.

“What is it?” Targutai asked, swinging his leg around from his saddle and hopping to the ground. He strode briskly toward the Minghan, and stumbled when Megetu reached out, catching him firmly by the shoulder. “Get your hand off me -- ” Targutai began, his brows drawn as he flapped his arm. His voice faded when he saw the severe expression on Megetu’s face, the deep furrow between his brows.

“Keep behind me,” Megetu told him, laying his hand against the pommel of his scimitar. “Could be Oirat trick.”

He moved forward, brushing past Targutai, and the young Kagan fell in step behind him, frowning, balling his hands into fists. “Let them try to trick us,” he said. “I am not afraid of them.”

Megetu glanced over his shoulder at him, and then at the high slopes of the debris trough around them. “Unwise,” he said simply, walking again.

“What?” Targutai blinked at him. “What did you say? Megetu -- slow down!”

The sentries had discovered the body of Jobin Dunster among the rubble. The man’s neck had been snapped, his head wrenched about on its axis until his chin nearly met the center of his back. Targutai and Megetu stood side by side, looking down at the dirt-covered corpse. Targutai said nothing, his eyes flown wide in startled surprise as he recognized Jobin’s face. Megetu genuflected beside the body, leaning down to peer at the ground.

“Blood here,” he said, glancing toward the sentries, and then over his shoulder at Targutai. He pointed to a spot on the earth a few feet beyond Jobin’s body, a place where the ground had been soaked with blood in a dark, wide circumference. Megetu hooked his hands against Jobin’s shoulder and hip and flipped the corpse over. He frowned, looking at Targutai again. “Not his.”

“Whose, then?” Targutai asked, looking around, trying to peer through the shadows. His perceptions had altered as they had approached Heese; the coronas of color and light he had been privy to only hours ago were gone now. When he tried to summon his power, to open his mind, there was nothing. It felt stifled within him,

smothered, almost like a down-filled pillow pressed over his face. His frown deepened and he turned, finding Mongoljin standing nearby. "Why can I not use my powers?" he demanded. "What is keeping them from me?"

"It is a manang, my Kagan," Mongoljin said, lowering her eyes to the ground in deference. "It is buyu -- a shaman spell. A shroud to block hiimori. The Oirat have been using it to keep me from them, to hide their thoughts, their movements from me."

"Who is doing it?" Targutai snapped. "Is it Yeb Oyugunde, the Oirat shaman? How can he keep us from them? You are stronger than he is -- I am stronger than him!"

"Too much blood here," Megetu said quietly, rising to his feet. He looked down at Targutai. "No man lived through this."

"Whose blood?" Targutai asked Mongoljin. "Do you know what happened here?"

"Does it matter, my Kagan?" Mongoljin said. Her black eyes traveled from Targutai to Megetu, locking with the eunuch's. "Or does your Minghan offer you distraction without cause?"

"Danger here," Megetu said. He did not lower his gaze from Mongoljin's this time; his brows furrowed and he frowned at her. "All around. Bad omens."

"Mongoljin is right," Targutai said. "It does not matter. Jobin Dunster served his purpose among us. Some Oirat simply disposed of him and spared us the trouble. If he took one of them with him..." He nodded at the blood. "So much the better. All of you back in your saddles. We ride again."

They crossed the shallows of the Okin as they approached the entrance to Heese. The portico of the threshold, its broad steps and colonnade, the vaulted arch and pillars rising above it were all bathed in pale moonlight. The dragon's profile towering above, perched along the cliff face towered like a shadow-draped sentry watching the Khahl draw near. The Minghan gathered around the base of the stairs, their heads tilted back as they marveled over the structure, as dumbstruck with wonder as the Oirat had been only hours earlier.

"Ancient place," Megetu whispered, his eyes wide. "Buyu lies here in the stones."

"It is mine now," Targutai said. He swung himself down from his saddle and strode boldly toward the threshold, mounting the stairs. He looked up at the imposing

visage of the dragon, carved in meticulous relief from the mountain. "I will see every mountainside marked with that -- my symbol -- when our empire is restored." He pointed to the dragon's shoulder. "Only I will be astride it -- the Negh triumphant so that all can see me. They will know my face, my name -- and my power."

He stumbled upon something lying in the shadows on one of the risers and paused, looking down. "Another dead child," he said, kicking it experimentally with his boot. It was shrouded with crusted, dry-rotted blankets, but when Targutai prodded it hard enough to send it rolling, tumbling down the stairs, he caught a glimpse of moonlight against a curve of bone, the shadowed hollow of an eye socket. Like the Oirat, the Khahl had found the mummified remains of l'uitan children as they had followed the path to the lair.

"Many dead children," Megetu said from behind him. He had dismounted his bergelmir, following Targutai. He looked around, surveying the portico grimly, finding other silhouetted, huddled figures lying in the shadows.

"They sacrificed themselves for you, my Kagan," Mongoljin said. "So that you could know triumph."

Targutai tromped down the steps and knelt beside the tumbled, blanket-draped body. He jerked the blankets aside, the ancient wool crumbling into dust in his fist. He wrenched open the front of the child's del, tearing buttons loose of weathered threading. Even in the pale moonlight, he could see the withered, dried skin of the child's chest, and the mark that had been tattooed there, as it had been with all of the others.

"For me, Mongoljin?" he asked, looking up at her. "Or to be me? Stupid l'uitan -- they knew of the legends and they had hoped to trick the dragons. You said their shamans channeled the gazriin ezen and once knew the way here, to the lair. They marked their children with the seven stars and brought them to this place -- brought them all among the mountains -- and left them to die when their deceit did not work -- when the dragons did not come."

He stood and kicked the little form again. He felt ancient bones crunch and crumple beneath the toe of his gutal. He jarred the corpse enough that the little scarf-swathed skull jostled loose of its moorings and tumbled away, rolling along the ground.

Targutai laughed. "Stupid l'uitan," he said again, and he punted the skull mightily, sending it sailing toward the river.

He turned to Mongoljin again. "Where does that door lead?" he asked, pointing to the portico. "What did the gazriin ezen show you?"

"Beyond it lies a corridor," Mongoljin replied. "Straight for a time, and then it bears to the left. It was fortified once, an iron gate installed to protect the city. The baga'han left it open when they abandoned this place, but it collapsed. The Oirat would have had to dig past it. Such effort will have delayed them."

"Not for long," Targutai said. He looked over his shoulder at Megetu. "Order my men from their saddles. The Oirat have already made it inside and will be waiting for us. They will try to attack us among the ruins. Send Neikun's men ahead. They doubted me as much as their chieftain did. They will answer for that by serving as fodder for me."

Megetu nodded and began to shout out orders to the Minghan. As the soldiers began to dismount, Mongoljin lowered herself gracefully from her bergelmir and came to stand beside Targutai. "Can you sense them?" he asked her. "The Oirat. Can you tell how far they have made it beyond the threshold?"

"No, my Kagan," she said. "The manang keeps them hidden from me."

Targutai watched forty Minghan mount the portico stairs, approaching the doorway. These were Neikun's men, and they walked hesitantly across the terrace, their eyes darting about them as they scanned the shadows.

"The city will not lie as the gazriin ezen remembers it," Mongoljin said. "It will be crumbled, damaged, different than how it seems in my mind -- and in Rhyden Fabhcun's. The false one will be slowed as they pick their way through the rubble."

"They still have several hours' lead on us," Targutai said, frowning. "Even if they left their Kelet behind to wait for us, Temuchin Arightei would have gone on. No matter what state the city is in, he would have still moved toward the lair. What if the Oirat's rot buyu works? What if the dragons are tricked, and come for him?"

He whirled around, angry, and punted the withered body of the l'uitan with all of his might. "There must be a way to stop him!" he snapped, and he kicked the body again. "Why do you not stop him, Mongoljin? You plowed aside mountains back there -- are you helpless now? Manang or not -- there must be some way to slow them down!"

“Perhaps there is, my Kagan,” Mongoljin said quietly, and Targutai whirled to her, his brow arched sharply. “Though it would mean I must abandon this form for a time. I would be away from you. I would not be able to protect you.”

“I do not need your protection, Mongoljin,” he said. “I need you to bloody damn stop Temuchin Arightei from reaching my dragons! I can take care of myself. I could even without your powers, your gerel. Whatever you need to do -- do it. Do not stand her blinking at me, rooted in place like some bloody damn tree! Get in there and stop him!”

Mongoljin nodded, lowering her face politely. “Teyimu, minu Kagan,” she said. *Yes, my Kagan.* “You will need to have a care,” she said. “Protect my body for me while I am gone. Keep it safe from harm, and with you, so that I can be at your side when I am finished.”

“It is my mother’s body,” Targutai told her. “I will protect it for her.”

Mongoljin smiled at him. “Of course, my Kagan,” she said. She closed her eyes and Targutai felt something cold flutter past his face, like a sudden, frigid breeze. Mongoljin’s body -- Yisun’s form -- crumpled, her knees buckling beneath her as she toppled to the ground. Targutai yelped, startled by the abrupt abandonment of Mongoljin’s spirit, and he caught his mother in his arms, staggering beneath her as she slumped against him.

“Megetu!” he cried. “Megetu -- Tegerii boshig, help me! Get this thing off of me! Get her off me!”

Megetu hurried over, his eyes flown wide. He seized Yisun by the back of her del, his broad fist closing against the fur lined trim, the bundled plaits of her dark hair. He jerked her mightily backwards, throwing her aside, sending her sprawling to the ground.

“What are you doing?” Targutai cried, aghast. Megetu reached for him, his face twisted with alarm and worry, and Targutai curled his hand into a fist, punching Megetu in the chest. “You stupid hen!” he shouted. “I did not say throw her to the ground! Stupid, rot-brain eunuch!”

He shoved past Megetu and rushed for his mother’s body, falling onto his knees beside her, his hands fluttering over her prone, motionless form. She had struck her

head in the fall, bloodying her temple along a thin series of scrapes. Targutai glared at Megetu. "She is bleeding!" he yelled. "You cut her face! You know what her face means to her!"

"I...but you..." Megetu stammered, blinking in helpless bewilderment. "You called for help. I thought...I thought she attacked you."

"She did not attack me -- Mongoljin sent her spirit inside the tunnels to stop Temuchin Arightei!" Targutai cried. "You stupid rot! My mother's body fell when Mongoljin left it. You cut her face! Do you know what she will do to you for that? Do you, you ignorant rot?" He stood, shaking furiously, clenching his fists. "You had best be thankful your tender parts are already gone from you -- she would cut them off herself and shove them down your rot damn throat!"

Megetu stared at him, silent.

"Pick her up -- *carefully* pick her up, Megetu -- and carry her!" Targutai cried. "That is all! Just carry her! Mongoljin will need her form when she is finished with the Oirat and my mother will need it when we get back to Kharhorin! Stop banging it around!"

Megetu blinked at him, his brows lifting, his face twisting sorrow. "My Kagan," he said quietly, stepping forward, reaching for the boy. "Targutai, listen to me..."

"You would deafen me with your prattling squeals, peahen," Targutai said, swatting Megetu's hands away from him. "Pick her up and come on. Try to have a care with her."

He planted his palms against Megetu's chest and shoved him aside, tromping toward the threshold. "Come on!" he shouted to the remaining Minghan. "I came here to claim my destiny, not grow old and die upon these bloody stairs! Move your asses -- inside now!"

Chapter Six

Inside the tunnel, the Khahl found evidence of more earth tremors and fresh landslides. The walls of the corridor had collapsed in places, leaving piles of rubble around which the Minghan moved slowly, carefully. They reached the threshold of the fortified gate, and found it standing wide and unblocked. By the light of their torches, they could see the gate beyond the doorway. Something had struck it hard enough to batter it from its moorings, its grooved channels in the threshold walls. It lay canted at an angle between the wall and the floor well beyond the gateway.

“Mongoljin said it had collapsed,” Targutai said quietly, frowning as he and Megetu followed Neikun’s men past the threshold and into the tunnel beyond. “She said the Oirat would have had to dig their way through. It does not look like they dug through -- it looks like they bloody well summoned Keiden, the wind elemental to bash it down for them.”

“Powerful buyu,” Megetu agreed. He paused by the iron gate, staring at it, carrying Yisun’s body draped over his shoulder, her legs dangling against his chest. The gate was enormous; fifteen feet high, more than twenty feet across and three feet thick. It listed against the wall as if it had been propped there by a gigantic hand.

“Maybe Rhyden Fabhcun’s endur did this,” Targutai murmured.

“Maybe something stronger did,” Megetu said quietly, looking troubled. He glanced at Targutai, shifting Yisun’s limp weight against his shoulder, his hand clamped against the back of her thigh. “Keep behind me,” he said, and began to walk again. He curled his hand against the hilt of his scimitar, keeping it there, poised and ready.

The corridor forked to the right ahead of them. Neikun’s men had already rounded the sharp corner. Targutai and Megetu fell in step with the rest of the Minghan, keeping a wary distance and pace as they followed. The tunnel was long, but they could see as the scouts emerged ahead of them into a broader chamber; the glow from their torches grew wider as the circumference of glow expanded. Whatever lay in the chamber caused a fluttering, anxious murmur to stir through the ranks.

“What is it?” Targutai asked. He was shorter than his soldiers, and could not see around their shoulders. He frowned, stomping forward, shoving his way through them. He felt Megetu’s hand catch him by the scruff of his collar, and he squirmed, shrugging his shoulders mightily to dislodge his grasp. “Let go of me. Let me see.”

“Wait -- ” Megetu called after him, but Targutai paid him no mind. He elbowed and pushed his way among the Minghan until he stumbled out ahead of them and into the chamber. He paused, his eyes widening, his breath stilling in his throat as he tilted his head back, astounded. “Tengerii boshig...!” he whispered.

Before the fortified iron gate had been installed, the chamber the Khahl had entered had served as the interior threshold into the city of Heese. Like the exterior portico, this threshold had been chiseled and painstakingly hewn from the granite walls of the mountain’s belly itself. It cradled the rear diameter of the naturally formed cavern; two broad tiers of stone arcades, one atop the other. Each boasted more than forty pair of columns that stretched upward to form wide archways. The bottom colonnade consisted of simple, unadorned pillars with tall, squared pedestals; short, squat shafts and rounded, flared capitals. The upper arcade was far more elaborate, featuring cusped archways and alternating recessed portions. Crowning the upper tier were a series of relief sculptures, depictions of ancient Abhacan kings, military leaders and primitive deities, all sitting side by side across the impressive breadth of the chamber, as if holding silent counsel together.

Along the bottom arcade, stone steps led up to the colonnade. The steps were broken in ten places across the room, replaced by sloping ramps of stone. These were the entrances to Heese, where traders once drove their wagons filled with goods across the threshold and into the city proper for bartering on the market. Here, Abhacans from across the realm of Tirgeimhreadh had once passed, eager to visit Heese’s renowned libraries and museums, to study at its celebrated universities or to relax along one of its splendid recreational plateaus overlooking the Khar Mountains.

In all of his life, Targutai had never seen anything so enormous or magnificent. The sight of the threshold left him speechless with wonder for likely the first time in his days. When Megetu shouldered his way through the Minghan behind him, and clapped

his hand heavily against Targutai's shoulder to draw him back, he did not as much as whimper in protest.

"I...I thought they were small," he said softly, breathlessly, turning to look at Megetu. "The baga'han, Megetu. I thought they were small."

Megetu looked around at the colonnades, his brows raised, impressed. "Small in size," he said. "Not so small in might it seems."

Neikun's Minghan soldiers were nearly across the cavern; forty men dwarfed into inconsequence by the sheer size and width of the cave and the threshold. They fanned out, four apiece heading for each of the entry ramps. They carried their scimitars in hand, and looked around uncertainly, gazing up toward the upper arcade, and the shadows that lay heavily beyond each ornate archway.

"I have never seen anything like this before," Targutai breathed.

If Megetu had been paying more attention, he might have actually fainted; nothing impressed the young Kagan. He had come to an age when even the most magnificent of structures, or the most breathtaking of women quickly left him bored. However, Megetu was not paying attention to Targutai; his gaze was fixed upon the upper tier, scanning the archways. He had ordered the Minghan to keep back within the tunnel until Neikun's men had scouted beyond the colonnades, but the soldiers could not help themselves. Their curiosity had overwhelmed them, and they inched their way into the chamber, spreading out behind Targutai and Megetu along the circumference of the walls, marveling.

The archways were dark; there was no hint of light beyond, but Megetu watched them, turning his head slowly, his brows narrowing as he watched the glow of torches play against the stone columns framing each. As the scouts drew closer to the entrances, the illumination from their torches spread against the sculpted stone, dancing against the thresholds of the upper arches.

"It is beautiful, Megetu," Targutai said.

Megetu saw a fleeting wink of light from one of the archways above, so swift, it might have been imagined, had Megetu not spent the tenure of his days as a warrior, well-versed and seasoned in battle. He recognized the hint of firelight off of the

sharpened edge of *qara'qada*, the black stone the Khahl -- and the Oirat -- had used for generations to make arrowheads.

"It is not right," Megetu said, frowning. His hand was still planted firmly against Targutai's shoulder; he tightened his grip and jerked the boy backwards.

"What are you -- !" Targutai yelled as he stumbled against Megetu's chest; his voice cut short with a hiss of sudden wind through fletchings. Megetu whirled around, hunching his shoulders, folding himself protectively over Targutai. He felt the Oirat's arrow slam into the quiver strapped against the length of his spine, somehow missing the back of Yisun's head, her dangling arms.

The air suddenly filled with the whistling harmony of bowstrings released in near unison and a veritable rain of black-tipped arrows fell down upon the Khahl. The Minghan were caught like deer in an open field; flanked around the perimeter of the cave walls, most of them had no place to retreat to, no shelter to dive for to escape the Oirat's barrage. There were some rubble piles in the cave where landslides had crumbled the walls, but only enough sanctuary for less than a dozen men apiece. Those who were not lucky enough to reach the debris in time were caught as arrows ripped into their ranks, and the sharp snaps of impact, their bright shrieks of pain reverberated off of the cavern's vaulted ceilings.

"Tere ayu arga!" someone screamed. *It is a trick!*

"Gerdergu!" Megetu shouted, raising his head. *Back!* He rushed for the safety of the tunnel, dragging Targutai in tow, hoisting the struggling boy against the crook of his elbow as a new volley of arrows speared into the ground behind him, skewering into the Minghan. "Yabuqu gerdergu!" *Go back!*

He did not know how many Oirat archers lurked among the archways. Judging by the number of Uru'ut Kelet who had left the aysil at Qoyina Bay both by boat and bergelmir to join the false one in the mountains, and the number of bodies they had found washed ashore along the Urlug River after the Oirat had apparently capsized their boats, Megetu had estimated no more than ninety Kelet altogether had made it to Heese with Temuchin Arightei.

They would have sent some on with the boy to protect him, he thought, scrambling into the tunnel and throwing himself on the ground behind a small pile of

rubble, pinning Targutai beneath him. *But not many. They would know our numbers now -- Jobin Dunster would have told them. They would try to stop as many of us here as they can, while they have the advantage of cover, and we have little retreat. Most of their Kelet would remain here to stop us.*

The Uru'ut noyan, Juchin Batuqan, would have brought only the best among his Kelet with him. Megetu did not know Juchin personally, but knew him by reputation -- and by years of experience fighting him. The Uru'ut along the upper arcade would be trained and accomplished *hoyin'irgen*, which meant the skills they had honed from lifetimes spent hunting left little margin for error in their shots. Some of the Khahl had made it back into the tunnel with Megetu, but the rest were trapped in the cavern, running about, screaming as the Oirat's keen arrows plowed them down.

Megetu shrugged his shoulder, lowering Yisun to the ground. He sat back from Targutai and found the boy staring up at him, wide-eyed and stricken. "Keep here," Megetu said, unslinging his short-limbed bow from his back.

At this directive, the fear drained from Targutai's face to be replaced by defiant petulance. "I can fight," he said. "I am not helpless. Let me summon my power, like I did against Neikun. Their manang cannot stop me. Yeb Oyugundei cannot -- "

Megetu caught the boy's wrist gently but firmly, staying him. "It is not Yeb Oyugundei's manang," he said. He leaned toward Targutai, holding the boy's gaze. "Keep here," he said again. He released Targutai's arm and turned, raising his hips to peer over the rubble pile. Some of the Minghan had the same idea as he had; they crouched around the threshold of the chamber, launching their own arrows toward the upper tier of the arcade, returning the Oirat's fire. Beyond the threshold, he could see Minghan sprawled everywhere, motionless on the ground, arrows protruding from their backs, buttocks and skulls.

He reached over his shoulder, pinching fletchings between his fingertips. He stole from behind the debris without sparing Targutai another glance. He moved swiftly toward the doorway, keeping his shoulder near the wall. Other Minghan saw him coming and genuflected in the dirt as they fired their bows, granting their bahadur a clean shot above their heads.

“Kedu?” Megetu asked one of the soldiers, a man named Soyiketu he had known since his boyhood. *How many?*

“A pair for each archway,” Soyiketu said, drawing his bowstring back nearly to the joint of his jaw, keeping his gaze leveled along his arm, canting his bow at a slight angle to keep his line of aim unobstructed.

Eighty then, Megetu thought. *Leaving only ten to move forward with the boy.* It was just as he had suspected.

Soyiketu opened his fingers, and his arrow hissed as it sailed. He glanced at Megetu grimly. “They are nestled in deep. We cannot get a shot at them.”

Megetu settled the tip of his arrow against his knuckles and drew his bow-arm up, finding his mark. He drew the bowstring back, his brows furrowed as he scanned the arcade, watching, waiting. He caught a fleeting glimpse, the tell-tale gleam of light against the edge of an arrowhead again, and found his mark. He released his arrow, sending it flying toward the ceiling.

A sharp screech ripped above the screams of the Minghan, and a man toppled from the upper colonnade. He crashed against the ground and Megetu turned to Soyiketu, arching his brow. “Seventy-nine,” he said. “Watch for torchlight on their arrows. The qara’qada gleams.”

He ducked back as a whistling barrage of arrows answered his shot; he hunched his shoulder, shying further into the tunnel as arrowheads slammed into the stone walls near his face and clattered against the ground. *Only ten left to protect the boy,* he thought, stepping forward, risking a quick, sweeping glance around the cave before another pair of arrows hissed at him, forcing him to recoil. He felt the sharpened edge of one tug against the sleeve as it whipped past.

Only ten left to protect the boy, he thought again, mentally tallying the number of Minghan he had observed both within the tunnels and hunkered behind the rubble in the cavern beyond, returning the Oirat’s fire. *I can probably get thirty of us -- at least -- beyond that threshold.*

“We must hold them off,” Megetu said to Soyiketu. “We must get the Kagan past them.”

Soyiketu nodded. There was no questioning of Megetu's directive, or their purpose. All of the Minghan understood why they were there; there was no other purpose save to get Targutai through Heese and to the lair.

"They think they will keep us here," Megetu said, frowning as he launched another shot at the Oirat. Another archer tumbled from the arcade; Megetu, too, had trained since he had been four years old in the hunting methods of the hoyin'irgen. "Let them. They keep busy here, they do not follow us and protect the false one."

Soyiketu nodded again.

"I will take those ten," Megetu said, pointing beyond the threshold to a cluster of Minghan crouched behind a pile of rubble along the right side of the cave. "Thirteen there," he pointed to another group who had found cover behind debris ahead of the first cluster. "And those eight near the right corner. You follow me." He looked over his shoulder, glancing among the Minghan in the tunnel. "You all follow me," he said loudly. "Keep them from us. When we move for the threshold, charge forward. Make them fight you. Get us past them."

"Teyimu, bahadur," the Minghan said, their quiet, muffled voices overlapping. Yes.

Megetu turned, slinging his bow over his shoulder again and crouching as he hurried back to Targutai. He leaned over the rubble pile, holding his hand out to the boy. "Come with me."

Targutai looked uncertainly down at Yisun's prostrate form. Megetu hooked his fingertips under Targutai's chin, drawing his gaze. "Leave her."

Targutai's brows narrowed and his eyes flashed. "What do you mean, 'leave her?'" he asked, slapping Megetu's hand away. "You stupid hen, she is my mother -- the Qatun'Eke! We cannot just leave her here among the -- !" He yelped sharply, startled, as Megetu caught him by the front of his changyl and yanked him onto his feet. Targutai staggered, dancing on his tiptoes, and Megetu spun him smartly about, hooking his strong arm around the boy's waist, hoisting him against his chest. Targutai struggled against him, kicking his feet, smacking his fists against Megetu's arm.

"Let go of me!" he shouted. "Put me down! We are not leaving my mother!"

Your mother is dead, Megetu thought, feeling momentarily sorry for Targutai as he dragged him, wriggling and protesting toward the front of the tunnel. He paused, stooping, letting the boy's feet drop to the floor. He leaned over, speaking quietly against Targutai's ear, drawing him still. "Stop fighting me," he said. "I will take you inside, past the archways into the city."

"Mongoljin is the only one who knows the way to the lair," Targutai said, breathless from his thrashing. "She needs my mother's body. We cannot find the way through the city without her!"

"Mongoljin will find you," Megetu said. He loosened his grasp on Targutai, turning the boy around. "Do you not trust me? No one hurts you with me. Not ever. I will not let them." He stroked his hand against Targutai's hair, his face softening with gentle affection. "I take you to your destiny. You do not need a fire-sword or power to convince me. I always have known. You are the Negh. I will take you there, Targutai."

Targutai blinked at him. It was the most Megetu had ever said to him at one time. "Megetu..." he said softly.

"Come with me," Megetu said, and Targutai nodded. He let Megetu draw him against him, turning him around, tucking him against his broad chest. As they moved toward the front of the tunnel again, Megetu nodded sharply at a group of Minghan.

"You five with me," he said, and turned to another. "And you five. Three in front, three in back. Two on each side. Draw your bows. We move to the right inside the cave." He looked around at the other Minghan. "You others, move in behind us. Draw their fire and return it. Keep them from us."

"Teyimu, bahadur," the Khahl said, the reply rippling through the crowded ranks within the tunnel. Yes.

Megetu cupped his palm against the cap of Targutai's skull as they reached the threshold. "Keep your head down," he whispered to the boy. He glanced up at Soyiketu. "We move now," he said, and Soyiketu nodded.

"Zol, bahadur," Soyiketu said to him. *Good luck.*

The ten Minghan surrounded Megetu as he had ordered them and they all moved forward together into the cavern. Megetu crouched, holding Targutai against him, hunching his shoulders and folding himself over the boy. He heard the immediate

hiss of wind as the Oirat fired upon them, and the answering snap of Minghan bowstrings as the Khahl returned their fire. Arrows whipped down at them; one of the Minghan to his left staggered, his voice escaping him in a gargled, abrupt cry as he fell, an arrow caught in his skull. Megetu felt an arrow slam into the meat of his shoulder, just below the apex of his neck and the thick panel of his leather armor, and he grunted softly, his brows furrowing.

“Turgen!” he shouted. *Quickly!* “Qamug yagaraqu!” *Everyone hurry!*

They ran across the chamber, scrambling and diving behind the rubble pile. Megetu hunkered here, listening to the resounding slap of arrowheads striking the debris, sinking deep into the loose earth and broken stone. Targutai was still beneath him, unresisting, and Megetu lowered his cheek against the boy’s. “Ayu ci sayin, baga’negh?” he asked. *Are you alright, little one?*

Targutai nodded. “Teyimu,” he whispered. *Yes.*

Megetu raised his head, looking among the Minghan. “All of you are with me,” he said, and the soldiers nodded. “We move forward -- there.” He pointed to the next pile of rubble ahead of them. “We take those men with us. We all move for the lair.”

“Teyimu, bahadur.”

Megetu glanced at the remaining Minghan. “Four of you with me,” he said. “The rest keep here. Cover us when we move.”

The Minghan nodded, all of them nocking arrows against their bowstrings, readying their offensive. “Teyimu, bahadur,” they whispered together.

They moved again, the Minghan holding in a tight, protective cluster around Targutai. Megetu hoisted the boy’s feet from the ground as they sprinted for the next shelter of stone, and gritted his teeth, sucking in a hissing breath as he felt another arrow spear into his shoulder, sinking deep. The ground was littered with fallen Khahl; they stumbled and danced around the toppled bodies of their fellows. The Oirat realized what they were doing, what they meant to do, and launched volley after relentless volley of arrows down at them.

When they reached the next rubble pile, they scuttled for its shelter, shoving themselves into any nook or cranny in the sloping wall of earth they could find. There were thirteen Minghan already positioned here, firing at the Oirat, and they folded

themselves defensively about Megetu and Targutai, using their bodies to shield the young Kagan from any wayward arrows.

“Ayu ci sayin?” Megetu asked Targutai again. *Are you alright?* Targutai nodded, trembling against him like a young rabbit caught away from its clutch.

“We move again,” Megetu said, looking up among the men. “You four stay here to cover us. We all move there.” He nodded at the last pile of rubble ahead of them; they were halfway across the cavern now, and here was the broadest stretch of open, vulnerable ground between them and the threshold. More than fifteen feet of empty space lay between the two rubble piles, and all of it within easy, ready aim of the Oirat archers above.

“We will collect those Minghan and move again for the arches,” Megetu said. “Once we reach the columns, drop your bows for scimitars. The Kelet will come -- some will leave the upper level to fight us. The others...” He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the tunnel, where Soyiketu and other Minghan fired their bows, waiting in the shelter of the doorway for Megetu to reach the arcade. “They move forward when we do. They will draw Oirat fire from us, try to keep the Kelet from leaving the arches. But some will try. Keep them from our Kagan.”

The Minghan nodded, murmuring together in agreement. Megetu hoisted Targutai against him again, his legs poised beneath him, ready to rush forward again. “Bide yabuqu eduge -- turgen,” he said to the Minghan. *We go now -- quickly.*

They bolted out into the open, racing for the cover of the next mound. The Oirat archers were upon them immediately, sending a fierce round of arrows down at them. Two struck Megetu’s broad forearm, punching through the heavily lined hide of his shirt. He heard Minghan screaming, squawking as arrows caught them, sending them staggering and stumbling to the ground. He could hear the Oirat now, shouting to one another from above.

“Ende! Ende! Tere ayu Kagan! Kagan ujeku getulku!” they cried. *Here! Here! That is the Kagan! The Kagan is trying to pass!*

You cannot have him, Megetu thought, his gutal pounding against the ground as he ran. It was not a far distance between the rubble heaps; he had run twenty times the measure of the distance at a time, but all at once, it seemed to him an impossible

breadth. He skittered, floundering sideways as arrows punched into the ground within centimeters of his boots. He held Targutai fiercely against him as he ran, keeping himself tucked about the boy. Megetu had no children of his own. He had never married before entering the service of the Minghan, and obviously, he could never sire any offspring now that he had surrendered himself to being a eunuch. Targutai was as dear to him as would be any child of his own, and he guarded the boy with this ferocity and love in his heart. *You cannot have him. Not Targutai. Not my boy.*

He reached the rubble and heard a resounding roar from behind him as Soyiketu and the Minghan surged out from the tunnel, firing their bows and screaming to attract the Oirat's attention. Megetu loosened his grip around Targutai's waist long enough to flap his hand in imperative at the men gathered around him. "Yabuqu!" he shouted. *Go! "Bide yabuqu eduge! Eduge!" We go now! Now!*

They rushed from behind the mound, racing for the nearest ramp leading up to the colonnade. As they bolted beneath the shadowed shelter of stone, Megetu's head shot up, his eyes flown wide. He could hear the thunder of footsteps shuddering above them; the Kelet were coming. Most had fallen for Soyiketu's ruse and remained above, firing on the Minghan, but some were coming -- and quickly, from the sounds of it.

"Draw your scimitars!" Megetu shouted. He dropped Targutai unceremoniously to the ground; the boy staggered clumsily, and then yelped as Megetu seized him by the sleeve and yanked him behind him. He wrenched his scimitar loose from its sheath just as he saw shadowed forms dancing against the wall in the flickering torchlight -- the Kelet.

He had no idea of how many of them there were. The archway they had dashed through left them in a long, narrow corridor, and suddenly, the tight confines swarmed with charging Oirat warriors, their battle cries reverberating in deafening crescendo off of the vaulted ceiling, the glow of their torches bouncing in crazed, manic patterns against the wall. There could have been ten of them, or one hundred; Megetu did not know or care. He and the Minghan rushed forward to meet them, their scimitars brandished in their fists, swinging in broad, brutal arcs.

A large silhouette charged him and Megetu danced backwards, positioning himself in front of Targutai. He swung his scimitar up as he saw the wink of golden

firelight off of the sharpened edge of steel, blocking the Kelet's attack with his blade. He shoved the Oirat's sword aside, and drove his elbow up into the Kelet's face. He felt the sickening crunch of bone and sinew at the impact, and the Kelet cried out hoarsely, floundering back.

Another was on him almost immediately; Megetu pivoted, driving his scimitar around, battering aside the next Kelet's attack. He spun the hilt of his sword in his hand, adjusting his grip as the young Oirat staggered sideways, knocked off balance by Megetu's parry, and Megetu lunged forward, spearing the hooked tip of his blade through the center of the Kelet's breast, punching through his heavy hide armor. As the Kelet collapsed, sputtering for desperate breath as his life waned from his form, Megetu clasped his hilt in his fists and wrenched it loose from the boy's heart. He whirled as another Kelet came at him. He roared, his voice ripping through the corridor like the cry of an enraged bear, and battered aside a scimitar thrust meant for his ribcage.

"Alaqu qamug!" he shouted to his Minghan. *Kill them all!* He drove his scimitar in a sharp upward arc, the edge of his blade catching the Kelet beneath the shelf of his chin with enough force to cleave his head loose of its moorings. Blood spurted from the man's torn jugular as he collapsed, and it sprayed across Megetu's face. "Alaqu qamug! Qamug!"

Another Oirat charged him and Megetu pivoted, his hips knocking Targutai aside as the boy stumbled in step behind him. Megetu felt the breeze of the Kelet's scimitar tug against the side of his clothes, his armor plate, and he reared his fist back, sending his knuckles smashing into the Oirat's face. As the Kelet staggered away from him, Megetu shoved his blade through the man's belly, jerking the scimitar toward him so that the curved end ripped open the Kelet's gut, spilling his innards toward his gutal.

"Keep behind me!" Megetu screamed at Targutai. Another Uru'ut was upon him; Megetu floundered back, swinging his scimitar, parrying the Kelet's strikes. He staggered into Targutai, forcing the boy against the wall of the corridor and heard Targutai utter a breathless squawk as Megetu's heavy weight pinned him in place, nearly crushing the wind from his lungs. The Uru'ut thrust his scimitar at Megetu, meaning to impale him. Megetu swung his own blade, knocking the Kelet's aside just as the edge of the steel nicked beneath the hem of his breastplate. As the Uru'ut stumbled

against Megetu, the eunuch thrust his head forward, slamming the steel-rimmed brim of his helmet into the Kelet's forehead. The Kelet fell, dazed from the blow, and Megetu caught his chin in his free hand, wrenching the Kelet's head on the axis of his neck, snapping his spine.

"Hold onto me!" Megetu cried at Targutai as he moved, swinging his scimitar as more Kelet lunged at him. He felt the boy hook his fingers fiercely against the back of his sash, clinging to him, his gutal toes smacking against Megetu's heels as they stumbled ahead. "Move forward!" Megetu shouted to the Minghan. "Drive them back! We must pass!"

The world had descended into madness along the narrow length of the corridor. Everywhere silhouetted figures moved and surged, jostling into one another, slamming into walls. The air was thick with the stink of blood, and the resounding clatter of steel against steel, filled with breathless grunts and wrenching cries. Megetu reached behind him, closing his hand against Targutai's sleeve, holding him fast as he waded through the melee, cleaving a path as he moved along, swinging his scimitar wildly.

A man sprang at him; there was a startled moment when Megetu could see his face plainly in the fluttering torchlight and could not tell if it was Minghan or Kelet. Their features, their hair, even their clothing were so similar in appearance, they might have passed for kin in daylight. Megetu shoved his scimitar forward, punching through the young man's chest.

"Keep moving!" he screamed at the Minghan, battering aside another Oirat's sword strike. He dragged Targutai in step behind him, ducking to his right as a Kelet swung his scimitar wide, the hilt clasped between both fists, the edge of steel arcing for Megetu's throat. Megetu heard the whistle of wind within inches of his head; he heard the frightened intake of Targutai's breath as the boy cowered behind him. He pivoted his hips and drove his own scimitar forward, spearing through the Kelet's groin.

When another charged him, he threw himself sideways, smashing Targutai into the corridor wall again. He caught the Oirat by the wrist and wrenched his arm at an abrupt angle as the man ran past him. Megetu heard the snapping of bones in the Kelet's shoulder as the joint was ripped loose; the Kelet shrieked, and then Megetu

whirled his scimitar against his palm, brandishing it like a dagger, driving the blade into the back of the Oirat's neck.

He stumbled out past the end of the corridor, the passage behind him clogged with the trampled, tangled bodies of fallen Kelet and Minghan. To his left, Megetu could see a narrow stairwell leading down from the upper arcade; he saw the fluttering of more shadows against torchlight along the stairwell wall, and heard the rapid thudding of more gutals as Kelet rushed down.

He looked around wildly; the corridor opened into a long passageway carved out of the mountain, with off shooting tunnels and building facades hewn out of the granite. He yanked Targutai in tow, jerking the boy off his feet and tucking him beneath his arm against his hip as he began to run, following the passage to his left. Ten of the surviving Minghan managed to follow him, sprinting in step, but the rest were caught by the Kelet as they charged down the stairwell. The sounds of renewed battle filled the corridor from behind them as the Oirat and Khahl fought.

"This way!" Megetu yelled, sparing a glance over his shoulder at the Minghan behind him. The Kelet had noticed their escape, and a group of them thundered down the corridor, giving chase, screaming out battle cries, torchlight flashing off their scimitars.

Megetu did not know where he was, or where he was going. The city of Heese was laid out like an elaborate maze hewn from the bedrock and granite of Ondur Dobu; towering colonnades rose from the cave floors, stretching for the ceiling. Massive porticos loomed on every side of them, leading up into building recesses draped in heavy, foreboding shadows. The corridor was choked with rubble from where the earth had shifted over the millennia; Golotmo had stirred in her slumber beneath the ground, sending pillars collapsing, relief sculptures adorning ceilings and portico roof slopes crashing down. They had no torches of their own; the only light Megetu had to see by came from the frantic darting of the Oirat's torches behind them. He caught a glimpse of a narrow passage ahead of him on the right, some sort of alleyway cleaved between the corners of two smaller buildings. He ducked down the alley, hauling Targutai with him. The moment they crossed between the buildings, they were swallowed by absolute darkness.

Megetu stumbled blindly, hearing the other Minghan rush behind him. He felt his legs smack hard against fallen rocks on the ground and he staggered, wincing. "Find cover!" he hissed to the Minghan. "They are coming -- take cover!"

He managed to grope his way into what he thought was a corner of the cave they had entered. He clambered and squirmed over mounds of fallen stone and earth, and pressed himself and Targutai against the ground, crouched and cowering behind the pile. He heard Targutai open his mouth, drawing breath to speak, and he clamped his palm firmly over the boy's lips to stifle him. "Keep quiet," he whispered.

He heard the last scrabbling of the other Minghan as they scurried among the ruins and fell still, finding hiding places of their own in the darkness. He heard the pounding of the Kelet's gutal against the ground, and then torchlight spread through the chamber in a broad circumference as they followed the Minghan inside.

Megetu froze, his eyes flown wide, holding Targutai pinned against the ground. He could hear the Kelet's angry cries fade into bewildered, suspicious murmurs. They began to fan out around the cave, calling to one another, shouting out directives as they searched. Over the soft sounds of their boot soles in the loose gravel and dirt covering the ground, Megetu realized for the first time that he could hear the sound of water, a soft, burbling noise, like a kettle of stew left to simmer over a bank of coals. The air was oppressively thick and moist in the cave, and had a strong, foul stench to it, like eggs that had been left to sour in the sun. Megetu frowned, tucking his cheek against Targutai's. *What is this place?* he thought. *Tengerii boshig, what have we stumbled into?*

"Watch your step," Megetu heard one of the Kelet say. "The stones around the edges there are crumbling."

"Spread out," called another. "Bujeg -- search behind those rocks there. Taisi, take the doorway. They did not have time to leave this chamber. They are here somewhere."

The stench was nearly overwhelming. Megetu loosened his hand against Targutai's mouth to at least allow the boy to gulp in a mouthful of air. Targutai gasped softly, his nose wrinkling, his brows furrowing. "It stinks -- " he began, and Megetu covered his mouth again.

“Keep quiet,” he hissed again. He heard footsteps crunching in the gravel nearby, and did not move, his breath stilling in his throat.

“This one does not go all of the way back,” a Kelet said.

“Check behind it. Ashir -- stay away from the water,” said another.

The footsteps scabbled for uncertain purchase along the opposite slope of rubble, and Megetu looked up, watching the glow of a torch’s light spread above them as the Kelet drew near. He moved his free hand slowly, deliberately sliding his scimitar back into its scabbard. He reached for his knife, curled his fingers around the carved bone hilt and drew it silently loose of its sheath.

“There is a dead one here,” someone shouted out, and the Kelet on the other side of the rubble paused, his torchlight unmoving for a moment. “An arrow in his throat. He bled to death as he ran.”

Megetu let go of Targutai’s mouth and pulled his legs beneath him. He settled the knife hilt comfortably against his palm, and then unfurled his legs, crawling slowly, without a sound up the slope of rubble. He glanced back at Targutai and found the boy blinking at him, visibly frightened. He opened his mouth slightly, as if to whimper for Megetu, and Megetu shook his head once at him. *Keep quiet*, he thought.

“Maybe the others left him behind,” said the Kelet from above Megetu. He was moving again, his gutal falling slowly, carefully up the slope. “Maybe they did make it across to the other threshold.”

“Tengerii boshig, they could be anywhere in this place,” said another.

Megetu had managed to inch his way within a foot of the slope’s crest. He blinked, his breath tangling in his throat when the Kelet’s gutal toe suddenly stomped down into his line of sight, directly above his head. “We should go back,” he heard the Oirat say. “The others will be -- ”

He leaned out over the edge of the rubble, holding his torch aloft as he peered at the ground below and his voice abruptly faltered. He saw Megetu crouched and poised beneath him, Targutai huddled against the ground, and his eyes flew wide, his boot soles skittering in the dirt as he recoiled. “Tengerii -- !” he began, and then Megetu sprang at him, coiling his fist around the man’s sword arm. He shoved the slender

length of his knife up into the nook of the Kelet's jaw, and then threw him down to the ground, wrenching his blade loose as the Kelet fell.

"They are here!" another Kelet screamed as Megetu charged over the crest of the rubble, throwing aside his dagger and jerking his scimitar free from his belt. The other Minghan sprang out of their hidden corners and from behind piles of rocks and dirt as they heard their bahadur bellow out a resounding battle cry. Seven Kelet had managed to follow them from the city threshold; within moments, they lay sprawled against the ground, their throats and bellies opened, their blood pooling in thick puddles against the floor.

As the sounds of fighting faded, the clanging of steel against steel, the anguished cries waning into silence, Megetu heard Targutai utter a hoarse, guttural cry. Megetu jerked his head toward the sound, rushing for the rubble pile, his eyes flown wide. *Targutai!* he thought in sudden, bright panic. When he heard a sudden, piercing shriek rip through the air, ending abruptly, his heart seized all the more, and he scrambled over the edge of the mound, desperate to reach the boy. He paused, momentarily bewildered to discover Targutai standing above the Kelet warrior Megetu had tossed from the crest. Targutai had his guta sole planted against the prone man's belly as he wrenched the bloody length of his scimitar loose from his sternum. Targutai looked up at Megetu, his face spattered with blood, his brows drawing narrow.

"You did not kill him, you stupid rot," he snapped at Megetu. He stepped back from the Kelet's body, and then kicked it in the skull. "You did not kill him! He fell down here and then attacked me! You left me alone with him, you stupid, rotted peahen! I might have been killed!"

He tromped toward Megetu, scowling. The battle was over for the moment, the initial danger passed, and Targutai's fear had dissipated, yielding to his customary petulance. "No one hurts you with me. Not ever. I will not let them," he mocked, raising the pitch in his voice to a high squeal as he glared at Megetu. "My bloody ass, Megetu. Next time I will take care of myself, you stupid rot."

He shoved Megetu aside and stomped down the slope.

“We cannot stay here,” one of the Minghan said quietly, his voice reverberating against the ceiling. “Other Kelet might follow. It is not safe. We should keep moving.”

By the light of torches they had collected from the slain Oirat, they could see the breadth of the crumbling chamber in which they had found temporary shelter. It had apparently once been some sort of bath house, a solitary room with four long, shallow pools running the lengths of the walls. The pools were fed by subterranean hot springs but whatever soothing or medicinal effects the waters might have once offered had long since waned as the city around them had disintegrated. Now, they were filled with cloudy, murky water tainted a peculiar shade of yellow, crusted with a thick layer of orange foam that bubbled and gurgled. The Minghan inched their way cautiously around the pools, staring at them, watching torchlight play off of the golden, undulating surfaces.

“And where exactly are we supposed to go?” Targutai asked. He was standing near the far threshold, his face set in a disagreeable scowl, his hands closed into fists. He had been tossing broken bits of tile and stone into one of the pools, watching the strange, frothy water swallow each, but now he turned to the soldiers, angry. “Back to the threshold so that the Kelet can sink arrows into our skulls? Should we simply stand here like we are doing -- witless and cowering in this wretched, rotted stench? Or should we wander aimlessly beneath the mountains waiting for them to collapse upon our heads?”

The Minghan blinked at him, rebuked. “I...my Kagan,” he said, lowering his head. “I...I only meant that...that we...”

“Those are our choices,” Targutai shouted. “Give me another, if you can think of one! There is no place for us to go, you stupid rot! We do not know the way to the lair, and we have lost our guide.” He turned, leaning across the bath house threshold and into the tunnel beyond. Megetu was in the passageway, walking slowly, holding a torch up in his hand as he studied the ground. “We have lost our guide!” Targutai yelled again, to be certain Megetu heard him. “Mongoljin was the one who knew the way to the lair, and she is gone now! My mother’s body lies abandoned on the other side of the threshold, and Mongoljin probably cannot reach us now! The Oirat’s rotted manang will keep her spirit from finding us again!”

When Megetu did not so much as pause at Targutai's rantings, the boy fumed, his brows furrowing deeply. He marched into the tunnel, stomping after the eunuch. "This is all your fault!" he cried. "You stupid eunuch! You call yourself a bahadur? We have ten men left out of two hundred! *Ten men!* Why do we not simply charge the Oirat with bloody rot feathers in our hands instead of swords for all of the damn good ten men will serve us! And now Mongoljin is gone -- she is never going to find us again!"

Megetu still did not acknowledge him, and, furious, Targutai punched him in the arm. "You stupid rot!" he shouted, socking Megetu again. "It is your fault! The false one is on his way to my lair! He is going to claim my dragons, and it is all your -- "

Megetu caught his wrist as he moved to strike him again. He looked at the boy, his brows drawn. "Stop hitting me," he said. He pointed to the ground. "Look."

Targutai wrenched his arm loose of Megetu's grasp, stumbling back a step. "That hurt," he whined, rubbing his wrist gingerly.

Megetu raised his brows in a patient, patronizing fashion. "Look," he said again, and he raised his torch higher, letting the circumference of it light broaden about his feet.

Targutai looked down, and his complaints faded. He blinked at Megetu and then genuflected, studying the loose dirt and gravel covering the ground. "Footprints!"

"Gutal prints," Megetu said. "Made by Ulusian boots, but not ours. None of us have passed this way yet. And look here..." He walked a few steps forward, moving carefully so as not to disturb the imprints of boot soles left in the dust. Targutai followed him, and gasped softly at Megetu's discovery: a diminutive set of prints. He placed his foot lightly on the ground next to one and found the sizes of his boot sole and the print were nearly identical.

"Temuchin Arightei," he whispered.

"The false one came this way," Megetu told him, and Targutai looked up, grinning broadly.

"They left a path for us to follow! These footprints will they lead us straight to them, do you think?"

Megetu smiled. "Only one way to find out," he said, turning his gaze, following the overlapping sets of footprints as they disappeared down the passageway and beyond the perimeter of his torch's glow.

Targutai blinked at him, his brows lifting, his face softening with remorse. "Megetu," he said quietly. "I...I did not mean..."

"I know," Megetu said. He hooked his hand against the back of Targutai's neck and drew him against him in a brief but fond hug.

Targutai saw the bloodstains on Megetu's changyl where the eunuch had pulled loose the arrows that had struck him. The boy gasped softly, his eyes widening with alarm. "Megetu, you are hurt...!"

Megetu patted Targutai's cheek gently. "I will survive," he said. He nodded toward the bath house threshold. "Call to the others. Tell them to come."

"What about Mongoljin?" Targutai asked.

For murdering Yisun, I hope whatever hiimori has summoned this manang for the Oirat sends that bitch screaming and thrashing all of the way back to Tengriss, Megetu thought, but he managed to smile at the young Kagan. "She will find us if she can," he said. "Call to the others. We must keep moving. It is not safe here."

Chapter Seven

“These are narsana,” Juchin murmured, his brows narrowed thoughtfully as he squatted, studying a scattered pile of bones. They had made it beyond the ruined city of Heese proper, and had ventured into the ancient mine shafts beyond. Once, the Abhacan had harvested the rich supply of coal and iron ore buried beneath Ondur Dobu. All that remained of these past industrious endeavors were the tunnels, with wheel ruts dug deeply in parallel grooves along the floor; hollowed passageways that led the Oirat ever deeper into the dark belly of the mountain.

They had seen scattered bones all along the tunnels as Rhyden had guided them. The further they went, the more they seemed to find and the larger the carcasses seemed to have been to have left them behind.

Juchin poked the tip of his dagger through the eye socket of a broad, relatively rounded animal skull, lifting it from a small pile of loose dirt and gravel. There was no mistaking it, at least, not in the Uru’ut noyan’s experience, and he frowned, the furrow between his brows deepening. “There are several narsana here,” he said, raising his torch higher and turning his head, gazing down the tunnel. He could see his fire’s glow draping against several other skulls and tumbled bones nearby.

“How did they get here?” Aigiarn mused, folding her legs beneath her and squatting beside Juchin. She leaned over, peering curiously at the skull. She could see smaller bones on the ground in front of Juchin; slender ones, like fingers. She recognized the long, hooked claw still apparent on the tip of a shorter phalange, and realized it had been the narsana’s prehensile thumb. She glanced at Juchin, her brow raised. “So deep beneath the mountains? Do you think they made their way inside before the fortified gate collapsed? They would have been trapped inside and starved to death.”

“I do not know about that,” Juchin said quietly, studying the skull. He set it aside, wiping the length of his knife against his pant leg. He raised his hips, resheathing his blade, and then reached for a longer, wider bone, one from the animal’s forelimb.

“They could have come in through the plateaus,” Toghrul said from behind them. “Narsana are good climbers, and their coats are thick. They are hearty enough to have braved the mountain’s snow line and found dens for themselves in here.”

“I do not see any signs of a den,” Aigiarn remarked, rising to her feet. She frowned, holding her torch aloft as she looked around the tunnel. “They usually keep nests for their litters. There would be scat, and smaller bones -- prey remains.”

“I do not think this is a den,” Juchin said, standing. He had been staring at the narsana bone in his hand, studying it intently, but dropped it now as if it had burned him. He looked down at the skeletal remains for a moment, and then glanced warily toward the ceiling. “We should keep moving.”

Aigiarn noticed Juchin’s peculiar expression as he moved to walk past her; a mixture of alarm and uncharacteristic fear had passed over the Uru’ut noyan’s face. She caught Juchin by the arm. “Juchin, yagun ayu tere?” *What is it?*

Juchin glanced at her. “It...it is nothing, my Khanum” he said. “The Khahl must be inside the city by now, that is all. We cannot afford to linger.”

He walked away, the ten Kelet in their company moving to follow him as he continued down the corridor. As Toghrul stepped past her, following, she reached out, hooking her hand against his arm, staying him. He glanced at her, curious, and then leaned toward her as she arched her brow at him in silent beckon. “Something is wrong,” she said in a low voice, cutting her eyes briefly after Juchin. “Something about these bones troubled him.”

Toghrul frowned, baffled. “What?”

“I do not know,” she replied. “He would not tell me.”

Toghrul genuflected, finding the leg bone Juchin had discarded. He turned the shaft over between his hands, studying the weathered length. “Aigiarn, look at this.”

She knelt beside him, holding her torch high to spill light around them. She leaned toward the bone and immediately saw what Toghrul had noticed. “Puncture holes,” she whispered.

Toghrul nodded, meeting her gaze. “Wounds that sank deep,” he said. “Something tore into these remains with teeth.”

“An ikhama?” Aigiarn asked him. “If it found the narsana dead elsewhere in the tunnels, it might have dragged it here. There are more skeletons. Maybe this was an ikhama’s den.”

“You said it yourself -- no signs of nesting here,” Toghrul said.

Aigiarn frowned. She had lived on the open plains and forestlands of the Nuqut her entire life and knew all too well that narsana were the dominant predators of the region. They had no natural enemies except for men. “Could the baga’han have killed them?”

“Thousands of years ago?” Toghrul asked, raising his brow. “These bones do not look quite that old to me, Aigiarn.”

They did not look that old to her, either. In fact, to judge by the condition of the bones, and the scarce layer of dirt and gravel covering most of the remains, Aigiarn would estimate that none of the narsana had been dead for more than a year at the very most.

“Ikhama did not kill them,” she said. “Twenty ikhama together could not take down a single narsana, much less this many of them.”

Toghrul looked at her. “What does it mean?” he asked, looking as troubled as she felt.

“I do not know,” she whispered, glancing over her shoulder and watching Juchin lead the Kelet down the passage. “But I think Juchin knows.”

She raised her eyes, looking up toward the ceiling as Juchin had done. There was nothing there but the dancing light and shadows cast by her torch, and she frowned. *What were you looking for, Juchin?* she thought. *What do you think killed these narsana?*

While Juchin paused to examine the narsana bones with Aigiarn, Temu stood ahead of them along the passage next to Rhyden. Temu had been weak since they had embarked beneath the mountain. He had expended too much of his energy first by moving the gate, and then by fending off Mongoljin. He struggled not to let his fatigue show, but he was worried.

He glanced up at Rhyden, his dark eyes troubled. He had been trying to speak to Rhyden with his mind, to open himself to the Elf for hours now without success. He could not summon his hiimori, open his mind or sense things around him -- not even simple things, like the emotions or thoughts of those nearest to him. *Rhyden, can you hear me?* he asked. It had all seemed so easy to him earlier. Drawing Rhyden into the jabsar at the campsite had not taken much effort at all, but now, he could not reach Rhyden at all, no matter how hard he tried. *Rhyden, please. Can you hear me?*

Rhyden gave no indication he was aware of Temu's implore. He seemed distracted; his eyes were closed, his brows crimped slightly. He brought his hand toward his face, brushing his fingertips against his temple. Temu touched his sleeve, and he blinked, looking down at the boy. "Are you alright, Rhyden?" Temu said.

"Do you hear that?" Rhyden asked.

Temu blinked at him, puzzled. "Hear what?"

"Something whistling, or squealing," Rhyden said, looking down the tunnel, his mouth drawn in a disconcerted frown. "Something faint, but I... You do not hear it?"

Rhyden's sense of hearing was far more acute than any of the Oirat's and he could glean sounds from great distances with extraordinary clarity. Temu paused for a moment, holding his breath, struggling to discern whatever sounds had attracted Rhyden's attention, but there was nothing; only the soft voices of the Oirat, of his mother and Juchin speaking together quietly. "No, Rhyden."

Rhyden continued gazing down the tunnel for a long moment, and then he shook his head slightly, forking his fingers through his hair. "Must be imagining things," he murmured more to himself than to Temu. He glanced at the boy, his brow raised. "You do not sense anything?"

Temu shook his head. He was afraid to admit the truth to Rhyden, but forced himself to speak. "I cannot sense anything at all," he whispered. "I have not been able to ever since we left the camp, after I brought you to the jabsar. I think I broke my hiimori, Rhyden."

The corner of Rhyden's mouth lifted in a smile and he knelt by the boy. "You did not break it, Temu," he said gently. "You used a lot of power tonight from the sounds of things: moving the fortified gate, standing against Mongoljin, drawing me with you into

the jabsar. Your mind is probably just exhausted.” He reached up, tousling Temu’s hair fondly with his fingertips.

“It will come back, then?” Temu asked, and Rhyden laughed.

“Yes, I am sure it will,” he said. “Give it awhile. Let your strength restore.”

“Will it be back in time?” Temu whispered. “In time for us to reach the lair?”

Rhyden smiled again. “I am sure it will be,” he said. “Do not worry for it, Temu. It will be alright.”

Juchin walked past them, his sudden, heavy footsteps startling Temu and drawing Rhyden’s gaze. “We are moving again,” Juchin said to Rhyden. “How much further along this tunnel?”

Rhyden stood. “At this pace, another couple of hours,” he said. “We should come to an iron door, an old armory. The entrance to the lair’s tunnel is hidden by a wall inside.” When this seemed to upset Juchin, deepening the furrow between his brows, Rhyden added pointedly, “We are making good time. Even if the Khahl have made it past the Kelet at the city threshold, we still have several hours’ lead on them. They cannot catch up to us before we reach the lair.”

Juchin looked at him for a moment, not visibly soothed in the least. “Let us hope that is the most of our worries,” he said. He turned, walking away, leaving Rhyden puzzled.

“What did he mean by that?” he asked. He looked behind them and saw Aigiarn and Toghrul kneeling together alongside the far wall of the tunnel, examining the narsana bones Juchin had discovered with pinched and troubled expressions on their faces.

“I do not know,” Temu replied. He wished he could force his mind to open, so that he could see what the Uru’ut noyan was thinking. Something had disconcerted Juchin, that was for certain, and Juchin was not the sort to be readily intimidated or anxious about anything. If it worried him, then it must be something worth the concern.

Several of the Kelet brushed past them, following Juchin. They were muttering among themselves, their faces as fraught with anxiety as their leader’s. Temu saw them spare darting, wary glances toward the ceiling, and both he and Rhyden heard one of them whisper softly but clearly to another as he walked by: “*Semamitan.*”

Temu blinked, shying near Rhyden, his eyes wide with sudden trepidation. “What did he say?” Rhyden asked, looking down at the boy. “It sounded like he said *semamitan*...?”

Temu nodded, drawing against Rhyden’s side, his fingers hooking against the woolen folds of Rhyden’s sash. “He did,” he whispered, watching the Kelet walk away.

“What does that mean?” Rhyden asked, frowning.

“It means *silent beings*,” Temu offered quietly. “It is an old Uru’ut story. Bugu Baichu told me about it once. Mamma was mad at her for telling. I was little, and it scared me pretty bad.”

“What are *semamitan*?” Rhyden asked.

Temu glanced up at him, pressing his cheek against the chest of Rhyden’s del. “They are shadow forms,” he said. “Evil mountain spirits. Bugu Baichu told me they come down from the Khar in the winter months, when the Uru’ut keep their aysil at Qoyina Bay. They are big, like men, but they have wings like birds. They move like shadows -- fast and quiet. They steal little Uru’ut children who are naughty. They fly away with them into the mountains and then they eat them.”

“But that is just a story,” Rhyden said.

“Bugu Baichu told me Juchin had seen one,” Temu whispered, his eyes growing round. “Years ago, when he was my age -- just a little boy. She said the *semamitan* came to the aysil in the night and took Juchin’s baby sister from their ger. Juchin tried to stop it. He took a log from their fire and tried to drive it away, but it attacked him. That is how he got the scar on his face, Baichu said. The *semamitan* cut him with its claw.”

Rhyden managed a smile, though he looked somewhat uneasy nonetheless. “That is just a story, Temu,” he said again. “Something made up to make kids behave themselves.”

“Like the stories about rock bears that ate Elf children who did not eat their barley?” Temu asked, looking up at Rhyden.

Rhyden laughed, surprised that Temu remembered him mentioning this. “Yes, like that,” he said. “I did not eat my barley a lot as a lad. I saw my mother scold me for it and my father’s switch a time or two, if memory serves, but never a rock bear.” He

realized Temu's anxiety, and he put his arm around the boy. "The only shadows in these old caves are the ones under our feet, cast by our torches."

He dropped Temu a little wink, the sort that seemed to say, *Do not worry. It is alright*. Despite this, Rhyden was unnerved; Temu did not need hiimori to see this. Juchin's anxious behavior and the nervous murmurings among the Kelet had bothered him, too.

"Come on," Rhyden said, drawing Temu in step as he started down the tunnel. "We had better catch up. I am supposed to be leading this little expedition, right? Hard to do that if we are bringing up the rear."

They joined Juchin at the front of the Kelet. Whatever disquiet Juchin had felt at the discovery of the narsana remains did not quell once they were underway again. He walked with his torch raised high to keep the circumference of firelight wide about them, and his other hand planted firmly against the hilt of his scimitar. "Take a torch," Juchin said to Rhyden, as he nodded at one of his Kelet. The Uru'ut handed Rhyden a torch to carry. "Hold it up. Keep your eyes sharp."

"What am I looking for?" Rhyden asked.

Juchin glanced at him, meeting his gaze. "Temuchin, you should not walk so far ahead," he said, ignoring Rhyden's question altogether and turning his attention to the boy. "Why do you not fall back some, among the Kelet?"

"I want to walk with Rhyden," Temu said, shying near to the Elf, hooking his hand against Rhyden's sash.

"He is alright, Juchin," Rhyden said. "He can keep with me."

Juchin's brows narrowed. He offered only a soft grunt in reply, and then slowed his pace, falling back among the ranks, telling his men to keep their torches high, their gazes keen. Temu glanced over his shoulder, watching Juchin and realized Toghrul and Aigiarn had fallen behind. They were still by the narsana remains, only just now rising to their feet, speaking quietly to one another.

"What are Mamma and Toghrul talking about?" he asked.

Rhyden looked behind him and then down at Temu. "They are talking about the narsana bones," he said carefully.

Rhyden was a terrible liar, in Temu's estimation. In fact, Rhyden had told him there was something inherent in the character of Elves that made them incapable of lying. He could, however, select those truths he felt most inclined to share, and Temu had been slowly learning ways around this by asking questions, narrowing down Rhyden's options for truths until he had no other choice but to speak it in full. Rhyden had probably overheard Aigiarn and Toghrul talking, whether he wanted to, meant to or not. His astute hearing was as much a part of him -- something he was helpless against -- as his propensity for the truth.

"What about the bones?" Temu asked.

Rhyden arched his brow, perfectly aware of what Temu was doing. "There are holes in them."

"What kind of holes?" Temu asked, looking up at Rhyden.

"Must you do this?" Rhyden asked, and when Temu nodded, he sighed wearily. "Bite marks. Holes made by teeth, Toghrul thinks. He said something had been eating at the remains."

Temu's eyes grew wide. "What was eating them?" he whispered.

"They do not know," Rhyden said.

They walked along in silence for a moment. Temu drew closer to Rhyden, shied against his hip, his eyes scanning warily along the passageway. "Rhyden...?" he said at length.

"Yes, Temu?"

"What is a switch?"

Rhyden had obviously been anticipating another round of truth-whittling questions, and he blinked, momentarily caught off-guard.

"You said you saw your father's switch a time or two when you did not eat your barley," Temu said, looking up at him. "What is that?"

"With Eisos?" The corner of Rhyden's mouth hooked wryly. "Usually a green branch off a widdenberry tree behind the barn. It was something he would spank me with if I was being particularly unruly...which I was fairly often."

"Spank?" Temu frowned, puzzled.

“You know, swat me on the backside,” Rhyden said, gesturing demonstratively with his hand.

Temu’s eyes widened. “Your father hit you?”

“He did not beat me or anything. Just a lick or two. Trust me -- I always had it coming.”

“Did it hurt?” Temu asked.

“Not that I can recall,” Rhyden said. “I do not think that was the point.”

“What was the point, then?”

Rhyden laughed. “The anticipation of it happening,” he replied. “Eisos would stand in the doorway of our house and make me tromp across the barnyard to cut a switch down for myself. If I picked an old limb, or one that was too narrow, he would send me back for another. He would watch me all the while, his arms folded across his chest. I think that was the worst part.” He raised his brow. “Oirat do not spank their children?”

Temu shook his head. “Mamma and Toghrul send me to the ger if I am bad,” he said. “They makes me lie on my pallet, no toys, nothing.”

“Hoah,” Rhyden said. “Well, Eisos tried that, too.”

Temu frowned slightly. “Why do you call your father *Eisos*?”

“Because that is his name.”

Temu’s frown deepened. “No, I mean why do you not call him *Father*? Why do you call him by name?”

Rhyden looked away, following the broad arc of his torch’s light. Something melancholy passed across his face, a tremendous sorrow Temu could sense even without his hiimori.

“Do you not love your father anymore, Rhyden?” Temu whispered.

Rhyden blinked at him. “Of course I love him,” he said softly. “I just...I...I do not get to see him very often, that is all.”

“Why not?” Temu asked.

“I do not go to Tiralainn very often, and when I do...” He glanced at Temu. “We both keep very busy. It is hard to see him.”

“Do you miss him?”

That same sadness filled Rhyden's face again as he met Temu's gaze. "Sometimes I do," he said softly. He smiled. "I used to think my father had fixed the moon in the sky. He was a brave warrior and an accomplished leader among our people. I admired him very much, and I wanted to be like him someday."

"But you do not now?"

Rhyden was quiet for a long moment, simply holding Temu's gaze. "He lied to me," he said. "A very painful lie that cost other people who were dear to me a great deal. I think I might have found a way to understand...forgiven him anything, but not that."

"I thought Elves could not lie," Temu said.

Rhyden smiled again, this time without humor. "So did I."

Temu was quiet, looking down at his gutal. Rhyden looked away, watching his shadow splay and bob against the ground. "Is he sorry?" Temu asked after a moment, drawing Rhyden's gaze. "Your father, Eisos. Is he sorry he lied to you?"

"He has spent five years trying to convince me that he is."

"Why do you not believe him?" Temu asked.

"I...I do not know," Rhyden said. "I want to. Sometimes, I want very badly to believe him."

"Yeb used to tell me my father was always with me," Temu said. "Mamma says it, too, and Trejaeran told me that tonight, but I do not know. I never see him. He never comes for me, not even when I am in trouble...when I beg him to come. I think...tonight, when Trejaeran showed me how to move things, I realized that the things I see in my mind...the things my hiimori shows me...I think it has always been me. Yeb told me it was my father showing them to me, that he was my utha suld -- always with me -- but now I do not know." He lowered his head, his shoulders hunching, his face growing forlorn. "I am angry with him for that."

"I know, Temu," Rhyden said.

"I do not understand," Temu said. "Why does he not come for me? How can I believe he always be with me if I cannot ever see him?"

"I do not know," Rhyden said.

“I want to believe that he is,” Temu said. “I want very badly to believe in my father.”

“I know, Temu,” Rhyden said again, drawing Temu’s gaze. He slipped his hand against Temu’s, feeling the boy’s small fingers slip between his own. “I want to believe in my father, too.”

“Maybe we should,” Temu said. “Maybe we both should just believe.”

Rhyden smiled at him. “Muisse,” he said. *Indeed.* “Maybe we should.”

They followed the tunnel. The further they traveled, the warmer the air seemed to grow; a moist heat, like distant steam wafting through the passage. One of the first places Rhyden had led them through beyond the formal entrance to Heese had been a dilapidated cavern lined with shallow pools of water. The cave had smelled horrible; the water in the pools had been a strange, golden color, covered with a thick overlay of orange froth. The foamy surface of the water had moved, bubbling and gurgling. Rhyden had explained that the *baga’han* had once used the cave for a public bath house and that the pools were fed by underground hot springs. It had felt humid and warm within the ruins of the bath house, sort of like it felt now in the mine tunnels. Temu wondered if other hot springs wound their way through the mountains, and perhaps pooled somewhere nearby.

The air in the mine shaft stunk, too, though it was a different odor than the bath house. The water there had smelled putrid, like spoiled eggs. It was a different stench that greeted them now, a more acrid, pungent odor that seemed to be growing stronger.

“What is that smell?” Temu asked Rhyden, wrinkling his nose.

“I do not know,” Rhyden said, pivoting his torch about, studying the broad tunnel.

Temu’s gutal soles skittered beneath him, and Rhyden caught his arm to steady him. “Have a care, Temu. The ground is slick.”

“I think it is this mud,” Temu said, frowning, hopping on one foot as he peeked at his boot. In places along the dirt floor of the tunnels, there were patches of thick, glistening mud. They had encountered more and more of the patches as they went along and toward the sides of the tunnels, it was sometimes thick enough to nearly engulf a boot in full. The Oirat kept tromping through it but Temu could hear the Kelet

grumbling in complaint as they stumbled through the puddles. "It smells terrible," he said, grimacing.

Rhyden nodded, still gazing about the tunnel, his brows narrowed thoughtfully. "I know."

Away from the bitter chill of the Lydian winter, life had forged a course in the warm passageways. Temu watched small shadows -- hundreds of them -- darting about as the glow from Rhyden's torch approached. He heard a soft scuttling sound as these tiny creatures -- cockroaches, centipedes and beetles -- scurried away from the light, scuttling away into hiding places among the stone walls.

The illumination of torches danced against other cave life, as well. In fissures lining the walls and corners where landslides had left sloping piles of rubble piled to the hollowed arch of the ceiling, the yellow glow fell against gossamer strands of interwoven spiderwebs. Sometimes Temu would catch a quick glimpse of the spiders themselves -- small, grey silhouettes against the backdrop of the tunnel walls, splayed and motionless as the Oirat passed. Sometimes larger silhouettes dashed away from their approach; fleet-footed shadows along the outermost perimeter of their torchlight -- *ogotor*, or small, tailless rats, distant and diminutive cousins to the burlagh herd rodents the Oirat raised on the Nuqut.

The deeper they went beneath the mountain, the more the noises Rhyden had noticed earlier seemed to bother him. They waxed and waned, remaining unheard by anyone save Rhyden, but Temu could tell when the sounds came to him. Rhyden's brows would narrow; he would lift his chin as if searching along the ceiling for something. Sometimes his hand would brush against his ear, as if shooing a fly.

"You can hear it again," Temu said quietly when Rhyden pressed his fingertips to his brow, lowering his head slightly.

Rhyden nodded. "It is louder now."

"What is?" Aigiarn asked. She had moved up through the Kelet to walk with them, and she lay her hand against Rhyden's sleeve, her brows lifting with concern. "Rhyden, what is wrong?"

"I hear something," he said. "Something thrumming in the air like drumbeats, only it is shrill. Squeaking."

Aigiarn frowned, looking up at the cave ceiling. "I do not hear anything." She was not watching where she stepped, and when her guta settled in a smear of mud, she nearly slipped. She yelped, startled, the sole of her boot making a moist, slurping sound as she pulled it free of the puddle. Rhyden caught her by the waist, steadying her before she spilled. "What is this stuff?" Aigiarn asked, pausing long enough to grimace at the muck clinging to her boot. "Tengerii boshig, it is everywhere!"

"It stinks, too," Temu said. He reached beneath the neckline of his del, pulling the edge of his wool scarf up to his face. He tucked his mouth and nose beneath the folds of wool, hoping to dampen the stench somewhat.

"It is *bagasu*," Juchin said from behind them, stepping around the puddle Aigiarn had stumbled across. "Bat droppings."

Rhyden blinked in sudden realization. "Bats," he murmured. "Of course. These tunnels are warm, full of insects. A perfect place for bats. That is the sound I keep hearing."

Temu looked up toward the ceiling. He knew about bats; he had seen them at night fluttering about, and Yeb had stumbled upon them now and again whenever he would find caves near their aysils suitable to bless as manduagas. Temu had always been frightened by the peculiar creatures, but they had never troubled Yeb. He would chase them from caves with his dalbur fan, flapping at them until they flew away into the night, squeaking at the shaman in obstinate protest.

"They probably come to the mines to hibernate," Rhyden remarked. He noticed Temu's uncertain expression and smiled. "Do not worry, Temu. They will not bother us. They are more afraid of us than we might be of them."

Temu spared a glance over his shoulder. Despite Rhyden's reassurances, Juchin and the Uru'ut Kelet did not look so readily convinced. They kept looking uneasily about, their torches raised, their hands kept firmly against their scimitar hilts.

Temu heard a sudden, frantic fluttering sound from ahead of them, and he turned in time to see the shadowy blurs of ogor scampering into crevices and corners along the tunnel walls, along with insects scurrying for desperate cover beneath rock piles and in fissures. Rhyden gasped sharply, stumbling, dropping his torch. His hands darted for his ears and he winced, his eyes closed, his brows drawn.

“Rhyden -- !” Temu cried, frightened.

“Rhyden, what is it?” Aigiarn asked, startled and alarmed. She reached for him, and he staggered, shaking his head, gasping again.

“I...I do not know,” he said. “Hoah...I can hear them...” His voice dissolved as he sucked in another pained breath. “Mathair Maith...they...they are screaming...!”

Temu could not hear anything screaming, but he realized he could hear something else -- another flutter, this time no rodent or insect feet against the dirt. This was something swift and drawing near, the frenzied batting of hundreds of wings. He could hear squeaking now, shrill, frantic cheeps coming out of the darkness ahead of them, tiny little voices overlapping in a panicked din.

“What is that?” Toghrul breathed, jerking his head toward the sound, his eyes flown wide.

“Get down,” Juchin said. He whipped his scimitar from its sheath, spinning the hilt against his palm and closing his fingers about it. When Toghrul blinked at him, startled and bewildered, Juchin’s brows narrowed. “Get down!” he shouted, snatching Toghrul by the front of his del and jerking him in tow as he dropped to the ground, falling gracelessly and abruptly to his belly.

The Kelet sprawled against the dirt. Aigiarn grabbed Rhyden with one hand, Temu with the other, yanking them both with her. Temu had just barely stumbled to his knees, his hands moving instinctively to cover his head when the air above them was filled with a sudden swarm of screaming, fluttering bats. Their high-pitched shrieks filled the confines of the tunnel as hundreds of the creatures darted overhead. Temu cowered, crying out, clasping his fingers together behind the cap of his skull. He could feel the wind from their wings brushing against him; he could feel the darting tickle of wingtips, the fleeting tug of tiny talons against him as the bats flew past. He opened his eyes, raising his head slightly and risking a peek but there was nothing to see but countless, frantic silhouettes, tiny forms darting past him on swift breezes.

Rhyden cried out, too, his anguished voice rising above the bat cries. Whatever sounds the Oirat could hear, Rhyden heard a thousand-fold. The bats emitted some sort of shrill, high-frequency cries that were beyond the Oirat’s capacity to discern, but which nearly splintered Rhyden’s sensitive eardrums. Temu felt Rhyden writhe against him in

pain, and Temu pressed himself against the Elf, feeling Aigiarn's hands clutching desperately at them both, clinging to them.

"Rhyden!" Temu whimpered helplessly as Rhyden cried out again.

"Hold on, Rhyden," Aigiarn said, keeping her face tucked against his, grasping his hand tightly. "I am here. Hold onto me."

After what seemed like an eternity spent huddled against the ground, the bats were gone, the chattering, frenzied cloud past them, headed down the tunnel. One by one, the Oirat sat up slowly, blinking dazedly in the torchlight, their faces and clothes smudged with dirt. Aigiarn remained nestled against Rhyden as his cries faded into silence. She stroked her hand against his hair, whispering his name. "Rhyden, are you alright? Rhyden?"

He nodded, his breath escaping in him in a heavy, shuddering sigh. He sat up slowly, and Aigiarn sat with him, brushing his hair back from his face. "Hoah," he murmured, struggling to smile at her. "Bugger me, that was loud."

"Are you alright?" Temu asked, rising onto his knees. Rhyden turned to him and smiled again, hooking his hand against the back of Temu's neck, drawing him near in a brief embrace.

"Yes," he said quietly. "My ears are ringing, but I think I will survive."

"Tengerii boshig..." Toghrul said, stumbling to his feet. His long hair was askew from his plait, torn loose in tendrils by wayward bat claws. "Where did they all come from?"

"They were frightened," Juchin said quietly as he stood. He still clutched his scimitar in hand, and his mouth was set in a grim line. "They fled from something."

"From what?" Aigiarn asked. "What is happening, Juchin? Do you know? What would they be fleeing from?"

Juchin met her gaze, his expression grim. "Something bigger than they are. Much bigger, I think."

Rhyden buckled again, abruptly. His hands darted for his ears and he cried out hoarsely. "Mathair Maith!"

"Rhyden!" Aigiarn cried, falling to her knees, grasping him by the shoulders.

“Something is coming,” Rhyden gasped, tangling his fingers in his hair, clamping the heels of his palms over his ears. He shuddered violently and shook his head, crying out again. “Mathair Maith...I...I can hear it...!”

Temu felt a huff of breeze against the back of his neck, enough to flutter the fur trim of his del, to flap long strands of his hair into his face. He heard a whisper of air in motion, and then something seized him by the shoulders, a pair of large, heavy hands, splayed fingers hooked with long claws that punched through the hide of his shirt and into the meat of his chest and back. His eyes flew wide and he had a split second to suck in a startled, pained breath to cry out and then he was jerked to his feet.

“Mamma -- !” he yelped, his legs slapping against Rhyden as he danced on his tiptoes. He felt himself yanked upward, and suddenly, his boots pedaled in the open air. The claws sank deeply into his shoulders and he screamed in pain and bright terror. “Mamma!”

“Temu!” Aigiarn screamed, scrambling to her feet. “Temuchin -- no! No!”

Temu caught a glimpse of her at least ten feet below him, her face stricken with horror, her mouth opened wide as she shrieked his name, her hands outstretched desperately for him. He heard a heavy fluttering sound and then Aigiarn was gone. He was being carried through the air down the tunnel, away from his mother and the Oirat. He looked up and screamed, struggling wildly against the talons that held him fast.

A semamitan! his mind wailed. It is a semamitan!

He had been caught by a monster -- a bat the size of a grown man. It had enormous ears and tiny black eyes that glittered with the last of the firelight behind them. Its broad mouth opened wide, its short snout wrinkling back to reveal rows of sharp, wickedly hooked teeth. It flapped its immense wings again, and surged forward, swooping Temu into complete and utter darkness, bearing him toward the belly of the mountain.

“Temu!” Aigiarn shrieked. A shadow had caught him; something enormous and black had swooped down upon the boy, snatching him, wrenching him into the air. She scrambled to her feet as her son cried out for her, and she reached for him, her

desperate fingertips groping against the bottom of his gutal before he was jerked beyond her grasp. “Temuchin -- no! No!”

Another shadow suddenly rushed at her from beyond the circumference of torchlight. She floundered, throwing up her hands reflexively, and felt something heavy slam against her, knocking her backwards. She screamed when she caught a glimpse of it, when she realized what it was -- what had taken her child. It was a bat, a monstrosity with a wingspan of at least ten feet and a body nearly as long as her own. Its large rear talons swept forward, its wings momentarily enfolding her, and she felt its hind claws seize her by the hips, jerking her into the air. As her gutal soles left the ground, she screamed in pain, kicking her feet and hooking her hands into the scruffy, mottled fur of the bat’s underbelly.

“Aigiarn!” Rhyden cried out from below. She felt his hands fumble for purchase against her ankles as she pinwheeled her feet. The bat lowered its head, its lips drawn back from its wide mouthful of vicious teeth, and screeched at him. It was a shrill, awful sound to Aigiarn; to Rhyden, it would have been like steel spikes spearing into his brain. She saw him recoil, clutching at his head as he collapsed, writhing against the ground in agony.

“Rhyden!” Aigiarn cried, and then the breath was *whoofed* from her as the bat swooped toward the far wall of the tunnel, slamming her into the granite. The back of her skull smacked against the stone, and she saw stars dance before her eyes. She slumped in its grasp, feeling wind buffet her face, darkness descend around her as it flew, carrying her after Temu and down the tunnel.

She could hear Temu screaming, his faint cries finding her from somewhere ahead. The piteous sound of her son’s voice, filled with pain and terror, galvanized Aigiarn, and she struggled again, hooking her hands against the clawed hands clasped about her hips, shoving with all of her might in vain effort to dislodge them.

“Temu!” she cried, thrashing against the bat. She grabbed her dagger, jerking it loose of its sheath at her waist. She clasped the hilt in both hands and reared it back above her head, driving it as hard as she could into the bat’s gut. The animal shrieked, its voice shrill and piercing. It lurched in mid-air, its talons slipping loose of Aigiarn’s hips. She held fast to the dagger as it released her, straining to keep hold. She gritted

her teeth and reached up with one hand, coiling her fingers in the heavy fur of the animal's breast. It slammed her into a wall again, battering her over and over again, screaming as she only forced the blade deeper into its abdomen. Aigiarn tucked her head against the bat's midriff, feeling it swoop for the wall, and gasped, nearly losing her grip as the back of her shoulders and spine slammed repeatedly against the stone.

"You cannot have my son!" she screamed as it lurched again, flying wildly along the tunnel, flipping and whirling. Aigiarn forced herself up, crawling along the bat's torso. She hooked one arm around its broad, muscled neck and wrenched the dagger from its belly with the other. The bat screeched, snapping at her, her face within dangerous proximity to its teeth. Aigiarn tightened her arm about its neck, forcing it in a headlock, and she rammed the dagger through its chin, impaling its jaws together. It tried to scream again, its voice muffled but shrill, and Aigiarn clambered, hauling herself across the beast's shoulders, swinging her leg up and over. She forced herself onto the bat's back, straddling it, and crossed her legs beneath its head, clamping her calves about its throat.

"You cannot have my son!" she screamed again, struggling to loosen her scarf from beneath the collar of her del. She hooked the length of wool under the bat's chin, and yanked the ends back behind its head toward her. She cinched them together in a swift slipknot, and then drew back, tightening the scarf into a noose around the bat's neck.

It went wild beneath her, bucking and thrashing like an unbroken bergelmir newly introduced to the saddle. It began to careen across the dark breadth of the tunnel, ducking its head, slamming itself into the walls, trying to batter her from its back. Aigiarn hunkered against it for each brutal impact, getting the breath pummeled from her with every blow. She managed to tuck her head against its shoulder, protecting her vulnerable skull from the impacts, but she felt ribs splinter as she slammed into the stone; she tasted blood in her mouth, coursing down her face from her nose. She held fast to the makeshift reins she had made, clamping her legs in a fierce stranglehold around the bat's throat as it bashed itself against the stones, squealing and struggling.

She heard Temu scream again from somewhere ahead of her, his voice faint, barely audible. "Mamma!"

Her brows furrowed and she spat blood against the scruff of the bat's neck. "Not my son," she hissed, and she leaned to the right, putting all of her weight into her hip, wrenching against the sash to force the bat to turn in flight. It veered toward the sound of Temu's voice, and when it tried to turn away, to ram her into a wall again, Aigiarn jerked hard on the reins, forcing it to remain on course. "Temu!" she shouted over the rush of wind in her face. "Temu! I am coming! Call to me so I know where you are!"

It was as black as midnight on a moonless night; she could not see her hand in front of her face, much less Temu ahead of her. She caught his voice in the wind though, and forced the bat's head to remain in that direction.

"Mamma! Please! Help me!"

He was closer now. She was managing to steer the bat on a relatively straight course, despite its desperate, furious efforts to resist her. Aigiarn leaned over the bat, straining to see something, anything in the darkness. "Keep calling to me!" she cried to Temu. "Call to me, Temu! I am coming!"

She could not see him, but knew when she drew near to the bat carrying Temu. She heard Temu's frightened cries immediately from her left; she heard the loud rustle of the bat's wing flapping, batting within feet of her face. The bat that had caught Temu was aware of her approach and its voice screeched at her from out of the darkness, a shrill and furious shriek of indignation.

"Let him go!" Aigiarn wrenched the reins to her left, throwing her weight to the side, and her bat veered at an abrupt angle, ramming into the other. She grunted at the impact. The bats tussled together, their wings smacking into one another, and they smashed into the wall of the tunnel. She heard Temu yelp sharply as the claws grasping his shoulders tightened reflexively when they hit. The bat holding him screamed again in protest, struggling; Aigiarn felt the hooked edge of its wing claw whip against her face, tearing open her cheek and then it was gone, flapping ahead of her again. Her own bat dropped swiftly toward the ground, falling like deadweight, and Aigiarn jerked against her scarf, forcing its broad head back, making it regain floundering altitude. She kicked it, screaming at it, driving her gugal heels against its breast to spur it forward.

She forced it to chase its fellow and when she drew it close enough alongside, she yanked on the reins, plowing into the other bat again. She cried out breathlessly as

the two bats tangled together in a fluttering, writhing mass of wings, smashing into the wall. She caught the brunt of the impact against her back. Searing agony lanced through her broken ribs, and she leaned over her bat's head, clenching her teeth against a scream.

"Mamma!" Temu wailed as his bat wriggled away from the wall, swooping forward again.

"Let go of him!" Aigiarn shouted, kicking her bat again, forcing it into pursuit. Again, she drew alongside of Temu; again, she wrenched the reins to her left, plowing into the other bat. This time, as the two animals collided, Aigiarn released the scarf and leapt from her bat's shoulders, springing blindly, her hands outstretched for the other. She landed against the creature's back, her legs kicking against its rump, and she closed her hands into the fur of its scruff, clinging to it. It shrieked furiously and began to thrash as it flew, whirling about, its wings flapping noisily. It slammed itself backward against the tunnel wall, trying to batter Aigiarn loose. She screamed as she felt more ribs splinter with the brutal impact and this time, something in her hip and knee crunched in protest as the bat's weight smashed against her.

As it recoiled from the wall, Aigiarn reached up, seizing hold of it by the ear. She closed her fist and hauled herself toward its neck, hooking her arm beneath its chin and drawing her legs around it, straddling it as she had the other. It tried to ram her into the wall again and Aigiarn ducked to her right, tucking her head against its scruff as again, she slammed into the granite. She tightened her grip with her legs, clamping against the bat's neck with her thighs as her hand fumbled against her sash for the hilt of her scimitar. She drew the long, hooked blade loose and sat up, clasping the hilt between her hands. She felt the bat lurch, moving for the wall again, and she drove the length of the scimitar blade into the base of its skull. "Let go of my son!" she screamed, blood spraying from her mouth.

The bat careened wildly as the sword punched into its brain; it contorted in mid-air, flying face-first into the wall. It began to fall, its wing claws scrabbling against the stone as it screeched. Aigiarn jerked her scimitar loose and then thrust it down again, raising her hips, putting all of her weight behind the blow. She drove the blade into its head, wrenched it loose and then down again.

“Let go of my -- !” she shrieked, and then the bat plowed headlong into the ground. She heard Temu scream sharply at the impact and she was thrown off the side of the bat. She struck the creature’s wing and then slammed into the ground, landing on her side, knocking the breath and wits from herself. She tumbled, rolling to a dazed, breathless stop on her belly against the far wall of the tunnel.

Aigiarn lay there for a long, stunned moment, shuddering. “Temu...” she groaned, her voice little more than a hoarse croak forced from her throat. She shoved her palms against the ground and struggled to lift her head, to sit up. She sucked in a sharp, hissing breath as the movement sent a spear of pain shooting through her damaged hip and ribs. The pain was terrible, stripping her senses from her. She moaned softly, reeling, and slumped to the ground again, her consciousness waning. “Temu...” she breathed as her eyelids fluttered closed, her mind fading. “Temuchin...where...where are...?” She moved her hand weakly, trying to reach for her son, and then she fainted.

Chapter Eight

“Mamma -- !” Temu yelled as something swooped out of the darkness, an enormous shadow darting silently from beyond the circumference of torchlight toward the boy. Toghrul caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye and he whirled, his hand falling against his scimitar. He opened his mouth to shout out in warning, but it was too late. the shadow fell upon Temu, snatching him off the ground. Toghrul saw his feet flailing in midair as the boy kicked and struggled and then he was gone, swept back into the darkness as the shadow bore him aloft. “Mamma!” Temu cried out, his voice shrill with terror.

“Temu!” Aigiarn screamed, scrambling to her feet. “Temuchin -- no! No!”

“Temuchin!” Toghrul roared, jerking his scimitar from its sheath. He rushed forward, his gutal pounding against the dirt, and he screamed in new horror as another shadow came crashing down on Aigiarn, a pair of broad, immense wings enfolding her. She cried out and then, like Temu, she was gone, wrenched into the air. “Aigiarn!” Toghrul shouted. “Aigiarn! No!”

And then the world went mad. Dozens of large, looming shadows suddenly darted out of the darkness, swooping toward the Oirat. Toghrul staggered, catching sight of splayed wingspans, hooked and outstretched talons and wide, gaping mouths lined with glittering, pointed teeth. He recoiled, his eyes flown wide, his breath tangled in his throat. “Tengerii boshig...!” he gasped in horror.

“Semamitan!” Juchin screamed from behind Toghrul, and Toghrul stumbled, his eyes widening all the more. He knew the legends of the semamitan -- winged shadows that came down from the mountains to steal Uru’ut children and livestock -- but he had always thought they were only that: lore.

“Tengerii boshig!” he whispered again.

“Stop them!” Juchin screamed. His frantic cries were nearly drowned out by the screeches of these shadow forms, these impossibly huge, monstrous bats. They swarmed upon the Kelet, seeming to surge from every darkened corner of the tunnel

ahead of them, shrieking loudly in a deafening cacophony. "Stop them! They are taking the boy!"

Toghrul saw a blur of darkness darting for his head, and he threw himself sideways, his shoulder smacking against the dirt as he tumbled. He felt a flutter of wind tug against his clothes and hair, something groping for fleeting purchase against him -- the semamitan's splayed claws. He rolled, drawing his knees beneath him and springing to his feet. He heard Aigiarn shriek again and he whirled, racing toward the sound.

"Aigiarn!" he screamed. He could not see her; the monster that had grabbed her had carried her down the tunnel and into the darkness, following the other that had taken Temu. He could not see them, but he could hear them both screaming, and he ran, his legs drumming desperately, his chest straining for breath as he shrieked their names. "Aigiarn! Temuchin!"

He stumbled gracelessly over Rhyden. The Elf had collapsed, convulsing against the ground. Toghrul felt Rhyden's fingers close against his ankle, and he spilled, crying out, slamming into the dirt. He struck his chin hard, his back teeth clacking together against his tongue hard enough to draw blood, and he kicked at the Elf to dislodge his hands.

He had a half-second to realize Rhyden had likely just saved his life again. As he jerked his head to look over his shoulder, meaning to drive the heel of his boot into Rhyden's face, he felt wind whip against his cheek, and the insistent tug of bat claws fumbling against his shoulder, a fleeting and futile attempt to grasp him.

He saw the back end of the bat as it swept over them, its thick tail snapping behind it in the air like the length of a lash. He met Rhyden's gaze, wide-eyed with shock and disbelief.

"Took...them," Rhyden gasped. His hand abandoned Toghrul's ankle and darted for his head; his face was smeared with blood, his hair matted, the pale locks stained dark. Toghrul realized his ears were bleeding. Rhyden clutched at his head, writhing. "Help...them," he pleaded hoarsely, his fingers hooking against his scalp. "Toghrul, you...you must...help them...!"

The Kelet were screaming. Toghrul looked past Rhyden and could see them struggling, fighting with the bats. There were twenty of the monstrosities at least, all of

them darting and swooping about the narrow confines of the tunnel, attacking the Oirat. The Uru'ut did their best to stand against the bats. Toghrul could see the flash of firelight from fallen torches against brandished scimitars, and he could hear Juchin's booming voice shouting above the din of anguished shrieks and bat screeches, but they were outnumbered, and the creatures were swift, efficient and apparently ruthless in their efforts. Toghrul saw one of the semamitan rush down on one of Juchin's men, its wings thrusting forward, sweeping about him. The Kelet uttered a bright, shrill shriek, and then the bat darted up again toward the ceiling, taking the man with it.

It sailed over Toghrul's head, carrying the thrashing, screaming Kelet in its back talons. Toghrul watched in helpless, stricken horror as the semamitan lowered its head, its broad lips wrinkling back from its teeth. It snapped at the Kelet, ripping the top half of his skull loose of its moorings, ripping his head open at the juncture of his jaw. Blood spewed down against Toghrul's face in a hot spray, and he recoiled, crying out in terror and disgust.

"Please..." Rhyden gasped, shuddering against the ground. The bat cries must have been amplified a thousand-fold to his sensitive ears; he was immobilized, paralyzed by their screams. Toghrul scrambled to him, hooking his arm around Rhyden's waist and hauling him to his feet. Rhyden staggered against him, his knees buckling, nearly deadweight in Toghrul's grasp.

"Get up!" Toghrul screamed at him. "Get on your feet!"

He caught a hint of motion out of his peripheral vision, and he dove, dragging Rhyden with him. They crashed against the ground together as another bat darted overhead. Rhyden screamed as it passed, convulsing beneath Toghrul, his hands clawing desperately at Toghrul's sleeve.

"Get up," Toghrul said, forcing his knees beneath him, stumbling to his feet and dragging Rhyden with him. "We will both die here if you do not move."

"Leave me," Rhyden gasped, drooping against Toghrul, trying to cover his ears. "Aigiarn...and Temu...please, you...you must...!"

"I am not leaving you," Toghrul snapped, hauling him in step with him. A bat rushed at him and he recoiled, throwing Rhyden unceremoniously to the ground. He caught his scimitar hilt between his hands and swung it wide as the bat attacked, its

wings swept forward to engulf him in shadows, its back claws extended, reaching for him.

“Get away from us!” Toghrul screamed. He felt its talons close about his calves, jerking him forward. Its head darted for his throat, its lips drawn back from its crooked mouthful of teeth. Toghrul shoved his hand beneath the shelf of the bat’s chin, struggling to keep it from him as its jaws snapped, hot, frothy spittle spraying against his face. He whirled the scimitar in his right hand and drove the blade into the side of the bat’s neck. The bat screeched, its talons crushing against his legs as it thrashed in sudden pain.

Toghrul wrenched the scimitar loose and whirled it again, striking for the bat’s wing joint, plowing the sharpened edge of steel into the semamitan’s vulnerable shoulder. He jerked to the left, recoiling as it snapped at him again and felt the rush of its breath against the side of his face as its teeth closed within a hairs’ width of his cheek. He drove his sword again and again into the bat’s torso, thrusting blindly. He felt its claws pull against his legs as it tried to fly, to haul him into the air, and he fell backwards, slamming against the ground.

The bat’s wing was damaged where he had cleaved ligaments and muscles bridging from its shoulder, and when it tried to fly, it floundered gracelessly, toppling toward him. Toghrul screamed as it crashed down, its wings hooked to enfold him, its dark, glittering eyes locked with his, its mouth opened wide to tear his face and throat open. “No -- !” he shrieked, shoving the scimitar between them. He felt the sudden, immense weight of the bat crush against him. The long, hooked, prehensile thumb claws at the junctures of each wing grazed against his face, ripping his cheeks open and then dropped against either side of his head, framing him in heavy shadows. It impaled itself on the long, hooked blade of his scimitar as it collapsed; it punched through its breastbone and speared through its heart. Toghrul felt the moist huff of its last breath against his face, and then its broad snout drooped against his chest.

“Tengerii boshig!” he shrieked, struggling beneath its limp, heavy form. He managed to draw his leg between him and the bat’s torso, planting the sole of his guta against its gut. He heaved, straining mightily, kicking the dead animal off of him, sending it sprawling sideways to the ground.

He scrambled to his feet, wide-eyed and shuddering. He felt something fall heavily against his shoulder and he whirled about, brandishing his scimitar between his fists. "Juchin!"

"Get him out of here!" Juchin cried, shoving his forefinger at Rhyden. The Uru'ut noyan was drenched in gore; whether his own, or from one of the bat's, Toghrul could not tell. His del was soaked with blood, torn open across the breast; his mouth was bleeding, and there were deep gashes gouged along his face. He planted his palm against Toghrul's shoulder, pushing him. "Get Rhyden out of here!" he screamed again. "He is the only one who knows the way to the lair! Find Temu and keep them safe!"

"What about you?" Toghrul cried, and then a semamitan slammed into him, catching him squarely in the back, sending him flying off of his feet. He felt its talons sink deeply into his hips, and his gutal soles pedaled over open air as it jerked him off the ground. He screamed as the claws closed against him, grasping tightly.

"Toghrul!" Juchin cried, leaping at him. He caught Toghrul by the leg and Toghrul screamed again as Juchin's sudden weight forced the bat's claws all the deeper into his hips. Juchin was jerked off his feet as well; his hand shot up, his scimitar shoved between his teeth as he grasped above Toghrul's head, hooking his fingers into the bat's coarse fur. He climbed up Toghrul's body, dragging himself along. The bat snapped at him, floundering beneath the combined weights of the two men. As its head darted toward him, Juchin seized hold of his blade, ramming it into the creature's skull. The semamitan collapsed, crashing like a stone to the ground, and Toghrul and Juchin toppled with it. Juchin was thrown clear as the bat smashed into the dirt but Toghrul was caught beneath it. He cried out breathlessly at the impact, the weight of the bat slamming into him.

The bat was not dead; its talons clenched Toghrul's hips as its wings scabbled against the ground, dragging in the gravel. It tried to prop them beneath it, to raise its head, and Juchin charged it, leaping against its shoulder. He hooked his arm around its neck, claspng its chin in his hand, wrenching its head back. He shoved the blade of his scimitar beneath the shelf of its jaw and jerked it toward him, opening its throat in a sudden flood.

Toghrul felt its grip slacken against him, and he hacked at its feet with his own sword, cleaving through the heavy, hooked fingers. He struggled, thrashing against it, and then scuttled free as it slumped to the dirt, dead. He fell forward onto his knees, struggling to get his feet beneath him, to rise. He felt Juchin grab him about the waist, dragging him. "Get up!" Juchin shouted at him, hauling him upright. "Get up, bahadur!"

Juchin dragged him toward Rhyden, and then forced him to his knees, both of them huddled together beside the Elf. Rhyden had stopped writhing and screaming and lay crumpled against the ground, unconscious. "Get Rhyden out of here," Juchin said, closing his hand against the front of Toghrul's del and pulling him near. "They took Temuchin. You have to find him."

Toghrul blinked at him, thinking in dismay of the Kelet he had seen, the man whose head had been torn in half by the semamitan's teeth. As if he had read Toghrul's mind, Juchin offered him a firm, brisk shake, as one might a naughty pup. "He lives," Juchin hissed. "He is alive, Toghrul -- if they had been sent to kill him, they would have done it here in front of us. Mongoljin has sent these things. They have been summoned by dark Khahl buyu. You must find the boy. You must get the Elf out of here and make sure he leads Temu to the lair."

"What about you?" Toghrul asked. "I will not leave you, or our men! Not when I can --"

"We are all unimportant," Juchin snapped. He shifted his grasp, seizing Toghrul by the chin, and the younger man recoiled, shoving Juchin away from him. Juchin caught him by the wrist, and they tussled together.

"Of us all, no one matters but Temuchin. There is no other purpose but that, Toghrul!" Juchin shouted at him. "Either you see this through, or I run you through right here, right now and leave you to the semamitan -- you decide! Yes, I bore you on my shoulders when you were a child -- but you are a man now, and a bahadur, the descendent of dragonriders. Bear yourself, Toghrul. Get your feet beneath you and bear your own share of this destiny! You ask where my heart is -- where is yours? Fraught with indecision, wracked by pathetic emotion -- gather your wits about you, Toghrul! Take the Elf and get out of here!"

Toghrul stared at him, and Juchin shoved him away, turning him loose. “Do it,” he seethed, rising to his feet, spinning his scimitar hilt against his palm. “We will keep them from you for as long as we can. Find the boy. Do not make this all for nothing -- not for your weak and uncertain heart.”

Juchin stood. He did not make it three full strides from Toghrul before one of the bats was upon him, swooping down, its claws splayed wide to seize him. “Juchin!” Toghrul screamed, scrambling to his feet.

Juchin pivoted, and the bat slammed into him, throwing him a good ten feet backward. Juchin fell to the ground with the semamitan atop him, and Toghrul raced for him, his scimitar in hand. “Juchin!”

“Go!” he heard Juchin shriek. From beyond the bat’s shoulder, the arch of its wing, Toghrul could see the Uru’ut noyan pinned to the ground, struggling against the beast. Juchin had caught the bat by the chin and fought to hold its gnashing, snapping jaws at bay. His eyes locked with Toghrul’s his brows furrowed. “Leave me and go!” he screamed. “If you keep here, I will haunt you! I will defy the spirit tree -- the Tengri themselves -- and my ami will curse you! Ruin you! I will see you know no end of misery, Toghrul Bagatur -- go, damn you! Go!”

The semamitan was too powerful for him. Toghrul cried out in horror as its head rammed down against Juchin’s chest. Its wings folded over the noyan, and Juchin began to shriek, his voice ripping up shrill, agonized octaves. “Go, damn you!” he screeched at Toghrul. “You are our hope! You are all the hope there is left!”

Toghrul froze, stricken, seized with indecision. At last, he whirled, running away from Juchin, anguished to listen to the resounding echo of the man’s agonized screams. A semamitan flew at him, and Toghrul dove, throwing himself face first against the ground. The bat swooped over his head, its outstretched claws missing him by scant inches. Toghrul crawled on his belly, dragging his legs behind him toward Rhyden.

“Rhyden,” he said, closing his hand against Rhyden’s chin and giving his head a shake. “Rhyden, wake up.”

Rhyden did not respond. Toghrul drew his knees beneath him, crouching against the ground, and he grabbed Rhyden by the arm. He ducked his head, dragging Rhyden’s heavy, lifeless form over his shoulder. He stood, staggering, his knees

buckling beneath the Elf's limp weight. He glanced around him, clapping his hand against the back of Rhyden's thigh, holding him. The semamitan were momentarily focused on the Kelet, and Toghrul darted down the passageway, stepping beyond the fluttering perimeter of torchlight and into the shadows. He hugged the tunnel wall and ran into the darkness, running his palm against the stone to guide him while holding his scimitar thrust defensively before him.

Toghrul ran until the sounds of the Kelet screaming, the bat shrieking behind him had faded and he was certain that none of the semamitan had followed him. He ran until his torn and injured hips could no longer bear the strain of Rhyden's weight balanced precariously against his shoulder and he panted for exhausted breath. At last he drew to a stumbling halt, lowering Rhyden from his back and settling him in a semi-upright position on the ground, his shoulders propped against the wall. The gashes in Toghrul's hips from the semamitan's claws were still bleeding freely; his del and leggings were soaked with blood, and he grimaced, pressing his hands momentarily against the wounds, trying to stave the flow.

He could not see anything. The darkness in the tunnel was absolute. Toghrul called out loudly, listening as his voice reverberated along the passageway. "Aigiarn!" he shouted, his voice shrill with frantic implore. "Aigiarn! Temu! Can you hear me?"

Shut your mouth, he imagined Juchin snapping in his mind. *Are you mad? Do you want to draw the semamitan right to you? Why do you not simply scream out 'here I am! Come and take me!'*

"She is out there," Toghrul hissed, his brows furrowing. He shoved the heels of his hands against his temples, trying to silence his inner rebuke. "Aigiarn and Temu are both out there somewhere. They need me."

He lifted his chin again, screaming out hoarsely. "Aigiarn! Qamitha ayu ci?"
Where are you!

Rhyden moaned softly in the darkness and Toghrul heard the soft rustling of the Elf's clothes as he moved. "Rhyden," he said, reaching out, his fingertips fumbling until he found Rhyden's shoulders. "Rhyden, wake up."

He gave the Elf a firm shaking, and Rhyden moaned again, feebly. *Please wake up, Toghurul thought. For the love of the Tengri, I cannot haul your dead weight for the length of this tunnel -- not when Aigiarn and Temu need me -- need us -- to hurry.*

Toghurul reached for his bogcu pouch. Like Aigiarn, he had packed a small stone oil lamp in his bogcu when he had abandoned his bergelmir. He unfolded the scrap of fur bundled around it, uncapped it and struck flints. The wick was short and the circle of light that spilled around them was small in diameter, but solace from the heavy, imposing darkness nonetheless.

Toghurul set the lamp beside him and leaned forward again, touching Rhyden's face. "Rhyden," he whispered. "Come on. Wake up now. Wake up."

Rhyden moved, turning his face slightly, shrugging his shoulder as he stirred. "Aigiarn..." he moaned, his brows lifting. His eyes flew wide, his breath tangling in his throat and his hand shot up, hooking against Toghurul's wrist, clamping fiercely. "They took them -- !" he gasped.

"I know," Toghurul said, leaning forward to that he was bathed in the lamplight, visible to Rhyden. "Rhyden, it is me."

Rhyden blinked at him dazedly. "Toghurul?" he whispered, and then he blinked again, his fingertips fluttering against his throat, the bewilderment in his eyes only growing.

"We have to keep moving," Toghurul said. "The semamitan took Temu and Aigiarn this way. They could still live..." His voice faded at this, and he lowered his face, pained. "They could still live," he said again, closing his eyes and folding his hand into a fist. "Juchin said he thinks Mongoljin sent the bats. She would not kill Temu. She needs him alive to open the lair. She..."

"Toghurul?" Rhyden said again, softly, uncertainly, drawing Toghurul's gaze. Rhyden looked distraught as he leaned toward Toghurul, his brows lifting in desperate implore. "I...I cannot..."

"They are alive," Toghurul said. "And we will find them, Rhyden. I promise -- "

Rhyden brushed his fingertips against Toghurul's lips as he spoke, drawing Toghurul's voice to a startled halt. "What are you doing?" he asked, ducking.

Rhyden touched his ears, feeling blood against his fingertips on his skin, in his hair. "I...I cannot hear you," he whispered.

"What?" Toghrul asked.

"I cannot hear you," Rhyden said again, stricken. "Toghrul, I cannot hear anything."

Toghrul stared at him, startled. "What?"

"I cannot hear," Rhyden said, and he grasped Toghrul by the sleeve, his fingers hooked against the bloodstained hide. "Toghrul, please, I...I..."

Tengri above, the semamitan cries have deafened him, Toghrul thought, aghast. He stared at Rhyden in dismay, which did nothing to assuage Rhyden's own sudden, bright panic.

"Toghrul, I...I cannot...!" he began. Toghrul leaned forward, shoving one hand over Rhyden's mouth as he heard a sudden scrabbling sound from their left. Rhyden's eyes flew wide over Toghrul's fingers, his voice dissolving in a startled mewl.

"Quiet!" Toghrul hissed at him, his eyes darting in the direction of the sound. He snatched the lamp in hand and held it up, letting its feeble light spread as far as it was able. He caught a hint of movement, a shadow scurrying along the wall of the tunnel behind him, and the tension drained from his shoulders. His hand slipped free from Rhyden's lips, and he shuddered, uttering a breathless, nearly hysterical laugh. "Just an ogotno," he whispered, watching the small rat scamper away. He looked at Rhyden and laughed again. "Just an ogotno."

Rhyden blinked at him as if he had gone mad. *He did not hear it,* Toghrul thought. *Tengri ibegel bide, he has truly gone deaf.* He began to laugh again, hanging his head, his shoulders trembling. He pressed his hand over his face, shuddering, knowing if he did not laugh, he would likely burst into tears. *If we ever needed his Elfin hearing, it is now,* he thought. *The semamitan will massacre Juchin and the Kelet -- and then they will come for us. They move silently through the air. Rhyden was the only one who heard them. He could hear cries that were too high-pitched for the rest of us to sense.*

These same noises had apparently proven too shrill for the Elf, and had ruptured his eardrums, damaging his ears. Toghrul shook his head, hooking his fingers in his hair, laughing ruefully.

Rhyden's keen hearing could have also alerted Toghrul to Aigiarn and Temu's location. *The bats could have carried Aigiarn and Temu miles from us by now, he thought. And only Rhyden could have heard them if they cried out for help. The sound would have carried well enough in these tunnels to reach him.*

These realizations were apparently not lost upon Rhyden. He blinked at Toghrul, his eyes round and stricken. "They took Aigiarn and Temu," he said, and Toghrul nodded grimly.

"They could be anywhere in the tunnels now," he said.

"The bats will not kill them," Rhyden said. "Mongoljin must have sent them somehow. I know she must have. She would not kill them, Toghrul. The Khahl need Temu -- no matter what they do to Targutai, they need Temu to open the lair. They took Aigiarn because she is Temu's mother..." His voice faded, but he did not need to say more. Toghrul understood.

Mongoljin will hurt Aigiarn if she has to, in order to force Temu to open the lair for Targutai, he thought.

"We have to find them," Rhyden said, and Toghrul nodded. He rose to his feet and offered his hand to Rhyden, clasping his palm against the Elf's, and helping him rise. Rhyden stumbled clumsily, pressing his hand against his brow and wincing as he reclaimed his balance.

"What about Juchin?" he asked. "The Kelet from the Uru'ut?"

Toghrul lowered his gaze toward his gutal and shook his head. Juchin's last words still rang within his mind, tearing at his heart. *Bear yourself, Toghrul. Get your feet beneath you and bear your own share of this destiny! You ask where my heart is -- where is yours? Fraught with indecision, wracked by pathetic emotion -- gather your wits about you, Toghrul!*

Rhyden's eyes filled with stunned sorrow. "He made you go on without them," he whispered. "He made you take me with you...go after Temu. He sacrificed himself and the Kelet. He made you go on without them."

Do not make this all for nothing -- not for your weak and uncertain heart. Go, damn you! You are our hope! You are all the hope there is left!

Toghrul said nothing. He began to walk away, closing his hands into fists, his brows narrowing. Rhyden lingered behind him, his voice uncertain and unhappy. "Toghrul, I am sorry."

"Save your pity," Toghrul snapped at him without turning around. "You do not understand my pain. You do not understand my people -- or our sacrifices -- and you do not understand me."

He paused, closing his eyes, regretting the words as soon as they had escaped his mouth, despite the fact Rhyden could not hear them. He turned to Rhyden, noticing for the first time that the Elf was leaning heavily against the wall of the tunnel. Toghrul realized his sense of balance might have been altered at the loss of his hearing; at the least, the unfamiliar sensation of walking without hearing the rustling of clothes, the crunching of dirt and gravel underfoot had left him disoriented and unsteady.

"I am sorry, Toghrul," Rhyden said again.

Toghrul walked to him, shaking his head. "It is not your fault, Rhyden." He doubted Rhyden was able to watch his lips and understand what he was saying, but it was a truth that Toghrul knew needed to be admitted aloud nonetheless. "Come on," he said, slipping his arm around Rhyden's waist. "We have to keep moving."

Aigiarn came to as she felt Temu's small hands brushing against her. She could hear his voice, whimpering for her. "Mamma? Mamma, please...please wake up. Please...!"

He was crying; the soft sounds of his frightened tears, his fluttering gasps for breath roused her. "Please," he begged, his hands closing against her shoulders, shaking her. "Please...please wake up..."

"Temu..." she groaned, moving her fingers slowly, touching his knee. At her touch, he cried out softly, his hands dancing frantically against her.

"Mamma!" he cried. Aigiarn struggled to get her hands beneath her, and sat up slowly, moaning as her head swam. Temu scrambled against her, throwing his arms around her neck in a stranglehold and tucking himself against her chest. Aigiarn held

him in a fierce embrace, stroking her hand against his disheveled hair and kissing his ear as he shuddered against her.

"I...I thought you were dead!" he wept, his voice muffled against her del. "Like Yeb! I...I thought...!"

"It is alright," she whispered. "It is alright now, oyotona."

She cupped his face between her hands, pressing her lips against his forehead. "Are you hurt?" she asked. She patted her hands against him, feeling his face, his throat, his shoulders. She felt the damp fabric of his del, and he jerked against her, mewling softly. "Temu, you are bleeding!" she gasped.

"It does not hurt," he said. He did not want her inspecting him. He was distraught, and wanted her to hold him. He snuggled against her again, as if he was a boy half his age, pressing his cheek against her throat and trembling. "Mamma..."

Aigiarn enfolded him in her arms, turning her face down toward his. She rocked him gently, kissing him again. "It is alright. Hush now, oyotona. It is alright."

She lifted her head and strained her ears, listening for any signs of the bat moving, rustling or squirming in the darkness. She did not know how many times she had driven the scimitar into its skull, but surely it had been enough to kill it. The bats had moved silently through the tunnels to attack them, however and she knew she could not be certain without seeing it for herself. Temu was hurt, too. No matter what he said, the bat had held him by its claws, and he was in pain. She had to see how badly he might be injured. She looked around, but saw no hint of light. She had no idea how far the bats had carried them away from the other Oirat, but it was enough to leave them stranded in utter darkness, far from even the faintest glow of torchlight.

"Temu," she said. "Temu, sit back a moment. Let me..."

He was frightened and in shock, inconsolable. When she tried to ease away from him, he clung to her all the more, huddling against her. "No, Mamma!" he whimpered, shaking his head. "Please!"

"It is alright," she whispered, soothing. "Temu, listen to me. I am right here." She touched his face, feeling his breath flutter against her mouth as he lifted his head. "I am not going to leave you. Sit back for a moment. I will be right here. Let me get something out of my bogcu."

He was shaking like a dried reed caught in a wind gust, but let her drape her hands against his shoulders and settle him back. She fumbled in the dark with the ties of her bogcu pouch, wincing at another shiver of pain in her ribs. Earlier in the night, Jelmei had brought her an oil lamp so that she could try and peer through the narrow opening above the iron gate at Heese's entrance. She had wrapped the little round clay lamp in a square of fur and tucked inside of her bogcu in case she found need for it later. *Which I guess I have*, she thought, as she dipped her hand into the pouch and found the fur-wrapped bundle. She hoped it had not broken. Though she had been battered relentlessly against the tunnel walls, fighting with the bats, she had taken most of the blows to her side and back. Her stomach -- and her bogcu -- had been sheltered somewhat from the repeated impacts between her belly and the bat's fur.

She unwrapped the lamp, cradling it between her hands and feeling along its surface for any cracks or breaks. It felt intact, and Aigiarn blinked against relieved tears. She raised her hips, reaching into her bogcu again, finding her flints.

"Hold this, Temu," she said, pressing the lamp between his hands. "Do not drop it now. It is a lamp. Let me strike a flame to it."

She felt along the lip of the lamp; when it was not in use, it was plugged with a small stone cap to keep the oil inside from spilling. She tucked her fingertip beneath the edge of the cap and pulled it off, letting it fall to the ground. She struck the small scraps of flint together and a dazzle of sudden, bright sparks greeted her efforts. It took a few moments, but at last, the tentative sparks struck an equally hesitant flame against the wick. Aigiarn cradled her hands about the fire, letting the wick light fully, its small circumference of golden glow spilling across her and Temu.

"There, you see?" she whispered, looking up at Temu, smiling at him. "Now we have some light."

He nodded, blinking at her, his eyes enormous, swimming with tears. She could see that the front of his del had been torn, shredded by the bat's claws. His shoulders were soaked with blood and it had smeared along his neck, matting in the fur collar of his robe. He could likewise see that her face had been bloodied and his eyes widened all the more, his tears spilling, his lips quivering. "Mamma, you are hurt!"

Aigiarn shook her head, forcing herself to repress a grimace as the motion sent pain lancing through her. "Just some scrapes," she said. "Open your del up, Temu. Here, give me this..." She took the lamp from him, lifting it in her hand so that its light spread broadly around them as she surveyed their surroundings. She could see the gigantic bat now, sprawled and motionless against the ground about fifteen feet away from them. Its wings lay twisted and splayed skyward, its tail draped against the dirt, trailing behind it. Temu followed the direction of her gaze, and gasped in bright, new fear, drawing his hands toward his face as he cowered.

"It is alright," Aigiarn said softly. "It is dead."

"Are you sure?" Temu whispered.

"No," Aigiarn said. She kept the lamp in hand and rose slowly to her feet. She was unable to keep herself from wincing as she settled her weight on her injured hip. "But I will be." She glanced at Temu. "Stay right here. Open your del, oyotona. You are bleeding. We need to try and bind those wounds."

She limped toward the fallen bat, moving slowly, cautiously. She leaned against the wall of the tunnel as much as she could because it hurt her terribly to support her own weight in full, without the granite to brace her. As she walked alongside of the bat, she could see a pool of blood soaking into the ground about its head. Its lips were frozen, drawn back from its teeth in a snarl. Bloody froth glistened in the lamplight against the fur of its muzzle. Her scimitar protruded from the back of its head, thrust half-way to the hilt. Aigiarn approached the animal carefully. She poked her toe out, kicking it. It did not move, and she drew closer, reaching for the sword. She wrenched it loose and scuttled backward, her eyes flung wide, half-expecting the seemingly dead beast to lumber all at once to its feet and attack her. It did not, and she sighed heavily, turning to Temu.

"It is dead," she said, limping back to him. He had unfettered the front of his del and lowered the fur lined robe from his torso. He knelt on the ground, bare-chested and shivering. He watched as Aigiarn spun the scimitar against her palm, the blade whirling in a broad loop before she shoved it into her sheath. She looked around, but saw no signs of the other bat, the one that had grabbed her. It was long gone, apparently and had taken her dagger -- skewered between its jaws -- along with it.

Aigiarn knelt in front of Temu again, setting the lamp on the ground beside them. She loosened a small waterskin she had lashed to her belt as they had abandoned their bergelmirs for Heese. "Give me your scarf," she said to Temu.

He lifted the length of wool from atop his del, where he had placed it, offering it to her. Aigiarn raised her hips, drawing a brief measure of her sword from its scabbard, enough to nick the side of the scarf. She then ripped the cloth in half between her hands.

"Where are we?" Temu whispered. As she poured water against his wounds, he gasped softly, trembling.

"I am sorry, oyotona," she murmured. She lifted his arm slightly and began to dress his right shoulder, wrapping one of the scarf scraps around his narrow form. "I do not know where we are," she said, glancing at him momentarily. "Still along the main tunnel we were following, though. I do not think the bats turned down any other passageways."

"What about Rhyden?" Temu asked. "Toghrol and the others?"

Aigiarn paused, remembering Rhyden calling her name, reaching for her, his face twisting with excruciating pain, his voice ripping into screams as the bat screeched at him. *Please let him be alright*, she thought in silent implore to the Tengri. *Please...I love him. Let him be alright.*

"I do not know," she said after a moment. "They are behind us somewhere. Surely it cannot be that far." She tried to smile at him. *If I do not smile, Temu will know*, she thought. *He does not realize yet more bats might have attacked. He does not know about Rhyden screaming, crumpling to the ground.*

She looked into her son's dark, tear-filled eyes and felt her heart ache. *Let them all be alright*, she begged. *Please -- Yeb's death has nearly broken him. If something has happened to Rhyden or Toghrol, it will devastate him.*

"We will find them," she said. *Please, let us find them. Let them be alright.* "Do not worry, Temu."

As she set about binding his other shoulder, Temu turned, looking uncertainly toward the dead bat again. "That is a semamitan," he whispered, drawing Aigiarn's gaze. He blinked at her, stricken. "Like in the Uru'ut stories, Mamma. A shadow form."

Once, I might have told him the semamitan were just stories, Aigiarn thought, looking at the fallen creature. She could have told him it was only a bat; a gigantic, predatory version of the small cave bats they were more accustomed to. However, she had to admit, suddenly there seemed to be a perfectly logical explanation for the old Uru'ut legends of flying shadows swooping down silently from the mountains, snatching livestock and children, bearing them aloft. *Tengerii boshig, the explanation is lying fifteen feet away from me -- its brains and blood are still smeared on my scimitar.*

"Mongoljin sent them," Temu said softly.

"No, oyotona," Aigiarn said, cinching the ends of the scarf fragment in a knot to hold her makeshift wound dressing in place. "They must have heard us in the tunnels and --"

"No, Mamma," Temu insisted, shaking his head, his dark eyes wide. "Mongoljin sent them. She knows we are far ahead of the Khahl -- nearly to the lair. She is trying to stop us. She is trying to stop me."

Aigiarn paused, looking at him. "How do you know that, Temu?"

His eyes welled with fresh tears and he looked down at his lap. "Because she is stronger now," he whispered. "Much, much stronger. She can get past my manang if she tries hard enough -- she can touch other things and send other them through for her. Like Jobin Dunster. Like the semamitan."

Aigiarn blinked at him in surprise. "What...?"

Temu told her everything. He told her about Nala; about Trejaeran's visit that night, and how he had learned from the endur to move things with his mind. He told her about shoving the fortified gate of Heese aside; how he had inadvertently caused landslides within the tunnel. He told Aigiarn about Trejaeran leaving him to protect Yeb from Mongoljin's attack, and how he had witnessed Trejaeran's defeat -- Mongoljin running him through with the anam'cladh she had sent Jobin Dunster to claim from Rhyden.

"She is much stronger now," he said. "I was afraid to tell you or Toghrul or Juchin. I was afraid you would be angry with me. I am sorry, Mamma."

"Oyotona," she said softly, gathering him in her arms, holding him. "You do not have to be sorry. I could never be angry with you." She pressed her lips against his ear.

“I cannot call my hiimori now, Mamma,” he said, trembling against her. “Somehow I must still be summoning the manang, because Rhyden cannot use his hiimori, but I do not know how I am doing it -- how to make it stop. I cannot sense things like I could before. I did not sense the semamitan coming, or even the littler bats. Trejaeran told me I would be weak for using it to move the gate, and Rhyden said I should rest, that it would come back, but I...”

“It will come back,” Aigiarn said, kissing him again. “If Rhyden said it would come back, then it will.”

“What if it does not come back before we find the lair?” he asked. “What if the dragons will not come for me without it? Mongoljin said she was going to give Trejaeran’s gerel to Targutai so that the dragons would think he is me. What if they do?”

Aigiarn stroked her son’s hair gently. “You are the Negh, Temu, not Targutai. All of Mongoljin’s hiimori and deceit cannot change that or take that from you. The dragons will know. They will know the truth.”

She took a few moments to try and wash some of the blood off of her face. The flow had staved from her nose, but her mouth was battered fairly well and no matter how long she held a scrap of her sash pressed against her lip, she could still taste the bitter flavor of blood seeping against her tongue. Her body was beginning to ache all over, bruises and battered places making themselves known and apparent to her. She did not know how many ribs she had splintered, but judging by the pain that greeted each breath she struggled to draw in full, it felt like everyone of them along her left side was smashed.

“What do we do now?” Temu asked.

“We go back,” she said. “We follow this tunnel back the way we came and we find Rhyden, Toghrul and the others.”

Temu was quiet for a long moment, turning his gaze to look down either length of the darkened passage. “Which way did we come?”

Aigiarn blinked at him, dabbing the scrap of sash against her lip. “What?”

“The semamitan...” Temu said. “It was flipping around when you jumped on it...turning and...” His voice faded, his eyes filled with fear. “We turned all around,” he whispered. “Which way did we come from?”

Tengerii boshig, he is right, Aigiarn thought in dismayed realization. She looked around, trying to peer beyond the circumference of lamplight and into the shadows beyond. She had absolutely no idea which direction was which. Temu was right; the bats had thrashed and whirled them all about.

I do not know where we are, she thought, feeling her heart thrum in sudden, bright alarm. *I have no idea where we came from -- where Rhyden and the others are.*

“Rhyden!” she cried out, listening as her voice reverberated down the tunnel. It rolled in a slow, undulating echo until it waned into silence, unanswered. Aigiarn felt helpless tears in her eyes, and she cupped her hands around her mouth, screaming. “Rhyden! Rhyden, can you hear me? Rhyden -- please!”

Her voice had wrenched up into shrill, frantic octaves, tremulous with near panic. She glanced at her son, and forced her heart to slow to some semblance of calmed measure. *I cannot let Temu know we are lost*, she thought. *Look at him -- he is terrified. I am the only person keeping him from panic right now. He believes me -- believes in me.*

“Why does Rhyden not answer?” Temu whispered.

“Maybe he cannot hear us,” Aigiarn said.

“But he hears everything,” Temu said softly. “Even the bat cries from far away. He heard...”

She managed a smile for him. “Then maybe he did hear me, Temu. Our ears are not as keen as his. Maybe he is answering, but we cannot hear him for the distance. He is probably on his feet and running toward us at this very moment -- and Toghrul right along with him. We will probably stumble headlong into them both as we are making our way back.”

“Which way?” Temu asked.

“That way.” She pointed to her left, because the left felt the most right of the two choices before her.

“You are sure, Mamma?”

I have never been less sure of anything in my life. “Of course I am, Temu.” She tried to stand, leaning heavily against the wall as she got her feet beneath her. She closed her eyes, gritting her teeth as a spasm of pain speared through her side. She felt

Temu's hands against her, helping support her, and she opened her eyes, looking at him, struggling to smile.

"You are hurt," he said softly, anguished.

Aigiarn shook her head. "Not bad," she said. "Come on. Take the lamp."

They were vulnerable, now. If Temu was right, and Mongoljin had been strengthening her own hiimori with the hiimori of others, then it would not take her any time -- if at all -- to sense that Temu was away from the protection of the Kelet. She would send more semamitan or find some other means to get to him.

"Can you make it alright, Mamma?" Temu asked, leaning over and taking the lamp in hand.

Aigiarn nodded. "I...I will be fine." She curled her hand around the hilt of her scimitar and pulled it loose, carrying it. Temu blinked at the blade, wide-eyed, but said nothing. *He knows we are vulnerable, too, she thought. He knows if we do not find the others again -- and quickly -- that we are both probably in a lot of trouble.*

She nodded ahead of her. "You lead," she said. "I am right behind you."

Temu took her arm, draping it across his shoulders. He slipped his arm about her waist, and when she drew in a breath to protest, he looked up at her. "We will both lead."

Aigiarn smiled at him, unforced this time. "Alright, oyotona. Together, then."

"Come on, Mamma," Temu said quietly, stepping forward, leading her in gentle tow. "Lean on me. It is alright."

Chapter Nine

Targutai and the Minghan had made it through the city of Heese and into the vast, sprawling network of mining tunnels beyond. They had set a good pace for themselves, although one could not tell to judge by Targutai's impatience. His initial excitement and optimism at the discovery of the Oirat's footprints -- the trail Temuchin Arightei and his Kelet had inadvertently left for them to follow in the dirt and gravel -- had waned as the hours passed. He tromped along, surly and morose, his brows drawn together, his ears straining for any hints of sound in the passageways ahead of them.

"I thought Mongoljin was going to delay them," he complained. He had been hoping to hear the resounding crash of the tunnels caving in, of Mongoljin collapsing the mountains down on them, as she had along the riverbanks outside. "I do not understand. We have been walking for hours and nothing! No landslides, no screams -- not even a bloody mewl for help! What is she doing?"

Megetu thought of pointing out that Mongoljin was likely too smart to collapse the tunnels around the Oirat. Doing so would block not only their passage, but the Kahl's as well. This had apparently not occurred to Targutai, but Megetu held his tongue, letting the Kagan whine. To Megetu's point of view, they were moving as quickly as they could, and in the direction they needed to be going. Targutai's complaints did not slow their pace, and thus they could be tolerated.

"When I have restored our empire and crushed the Torachans, I am going to have this city rebuilt," Targutai declared. "I am going to make it my summer fortress. I will make my people come to me, pilgrimages from across the Morthir to my splendid thresholds, and they will offer me homage on their hands and knees." This idea -- one of many ambitions he had been yammering about nearly nonstop -- did not serve as pleasant distraction for long. He sighed heavily, an exasperated huff of air, and stomped his feet. "Where is Mongoljin?" he asked. "What is she doing?"

Hopefully rotting beneath the waves of Tengriss, Megetu thought. Maybe Temuchin Arightei's Elf-shaman took his spirit sword back from her and rammed it up her ass. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly in a fleeting smile.

Targutai paused in mid-stride, his eyes flying wide with surprise. Megetu glanced back at him, slowing his own gait, raising his brow curiously. "Megetu, my powers are back," Targutai whispered, looking up at him.

Megetu blinked. "You are certain?"

Targutai looked over his shoulder at one of the Minghan. He held his hand out toward the man, and the Minghan uttered a startled squeal as he was jerked off of his feet and thrown across the mine shaft. He slammed brutally into the far wall, hard enough to splatter blood out of his nose. Megetu winced, hunching his shoulders at the moist, sickening sound of his skull crunching beneath his helmet at the impact. The Minghan crumpled to the ground, lying still and lifeless on his belly.

The other Minghan shied back from Targutai in a wide circumference, their eyes wide and filled with fear.

Targutai turned to Megetu, hooking his brow. "Yes, I am certain," he said. He grinned broadly and with malicious good humor, rubbing his hands together. "Do you know what this means?"

I suppose I ought not to piss you off now, Megetu thought, taking an uncertain, hedging step back as Targutai strode toward him.

"It means Mongoljin has done it!" Targutai cried. "The Oirat's manang has fallen! They cannot block my hiimori anymore! She has stopped them somehow! She has probably torn Temuchin Arightei open from his chin to his crotch and left him in the dirt!"

He giggled. "She stopped the Oirat, Megetu. The lair is all mine for the claiming!" He tromped past Megetu, leading the way down the tunnel. "Come on, you rots!" he shouted. "Stop standing there as if you have taken root! I have dragons to claim, an empire to rebuild!"

The Minghan still hesitated behind him, the soldiers blinking uncertainly at Megetu. It was just as well. Targutai did not advance more than five steps before he froze again. "Something is coming," he said without turning around. He stood, poised and rigid, his head lifted in the direction of the ceiling.

Megetu drew his scimitar from its sheath, frowning as he lifted his torch higher, surveying the ceiling, following Targutai's gaze. "I do not hear anything."

Targutai turned, scowling. "I did not say *'listen, Megetu.'* I said 'something is coming.' I sense it, you stupid peahen. I do not hear it." He shook his head, turning around again. "Idiot," he muttered.

An enormous shadow swooped out of the darkness of the tunnel, something immense and darting straight for the boy. Megetu's eyes flew wide in alarm, and he bolted forward. "Targutai!" he cried, leaping at the Kagan. He tackled Targutai, knocking him off of his feet and pinning him to the ground just as the dark form rushed soundlessly over him.

Targutai yowled in outrage, struggling and squirming beneath Megetu. "Get off of me! What are you doing?"

The Minghan recoiled behind them, their frightened cries overlapping as suddenly, the tunnel filled with darting, swooping shadow forms. Megetu raised his head, looking over his shoulder, his eyes widening in horror as he realized they were bats -- a dozen enormous bats, each with wingspans at least ten feet wide, with torsos the length of grown men. "Tengerii boshig...!" he gasped.

The Minghan scrambled backward, brandishing their swords and whirling about, watching as the bats danced gracefully above them. The creatures made no move to attack them, and the Minghan's yelps and cries dwindled into bewildered, wary murmurs.

Targutai saw them, too, craning his head and wriggling somewhat from beneath Megetu's sheltering bulk. "Tengerii boshig," he breathed, his eyes widening. "Megetu, what are those things?"

They are semamitan, my Kagan, said a voice within his mind -- a voice purring through the minds of all of the Minghan.

"Mongoljin!" Targutai cried, grinning again. He thrashed beneath Megetu, shoving the eunuch away from him. "It is Mongoljin! Get off of me, you bloody damn ox!"

One by one, the semamitan dropped gracefully to the ground, their back feet draping daintily against the earth, their broad wings folding forward to support their torsos. Megetu saw Yisun's body riding astride one of the beasts, her legs wrapped around its neck, her hands curled loosely in its scruff. The bats stared at the Minghan, craning their wide heads and watching them with black, glittering eyes.

“Mongoljin!” Targutai cried again happily, scrambling to his feet. “You found us!”

“Yes, my Kagan,” Mongoljin said, lowering Yisun’s head in polite deference as he approached. She swung her leg around the bat’s shoulders and dropped to the ground, landing nimbly on her feet. “Forgive my delay. I might have arrived sooner had I not needed to retrieve my form from the threshold.”

At this, she turned her black gaze across the tunnel toward Megetu, her brows crimping slightly. She did not need to say another word. Megetu knew she understood precisely what he had planned, and why. He stared back at her, rising slowly to his feet, keeping his scimitar grasped in his fist.

“I told you!” Targutai shouted, glaring over his shoulder at the eunuch. He looked back at Mongoljin, beaming again. “Mongoljin, I have my powers back! The manang is gone! You did it!”

“Of course, my Kagan,” Mongoljin said, smiling gently at him. She reached out, brushing her fingertips beneath the shelf of his chin. “Did you doubt that I would? I know of no other purpose but this -- to see you know victory.”

“Then the Oirat are gone? You killed them?” Targutai asked. “Temuchin Arightei - - that false bastard -- you left him a bloody pile somewhere beneath the mountain?”

Mongoljin’s smile faltered slightly. “He is separated from the others, vulnerable now,” she said. “The semamitan have attacked the Kelet with him, scattering them like young rabbits from a plowed-over clutch. They -- ”

“But he is not dead?” Targutai blinked, the exuberance in his face fading abruptly into rage. “You did not kill him? What is the matter with you?”

He whirled around, throwing his hands up in the air. “Idiots! I am surrounded by bloody rot damn idiots!” He turned to Mongoljin, clamping his hands into fists. “Temuchin Arightei is marked with the Dologhon!” he shouted, his face flushed brightly. “He has the blue gerel his shamans stole from me! If he makes it to the lair, the dragons might think he is me -- the Negh! They might come for him! Separated from the others, vulnerable now, you say -- how bloody damn vulnerable can he be, Mongoljin, when he is still closer to the lair than me? You were supposed to kill him! Does logic escape everyone around me?” He spun in a broad circle, glowering. “Are you all bloody daft?”

“My Kagan, forgive me,” Mongoljin said quietly, lowering her gaze to her toes. “I would never mean to presume over your judgment. I left the false one to live because I could not deny you the pleasure, my Kagan, or your rightful privilege of killing him yourself.”

Targutai blinked at her, his anger fading.

“Such offense as he has brought upon you -- as his ancestors have yours, my Kagan, all of the way back to Duua and Dobun -- should not be brought to bear by one who only speaks and acts in your stead,” Mongoljin said. “It should be brought by your hand.”

“Oh,” Targutai said, blinking again. “Oh, well...yes, then...in that case. Well done, Mongoljin. You are right. It should be me to run him through.”

Mongoljin raised her eyes from the ground, smiling again. Megetu glowered at her. *You are lying*, he thought.

Mongoljin met his gaze. Megetu could feel her crawling around inside of him, cold, slithering fingers groping in his mind, sensing his thoughts, but he did not cow. He furrowed his brows at her. *You are lying*, he thought again. *That is not why you let the false one live.*

You are not nearly as clever as you think, eunuch, Mongoljin whispered to him. *And nowhere near as indisposable.*

“As to the problem of proximity, my Kagan...” Mongoljin said aloud, gazing down at Targutai. “I have seen to that for you, as well. Rhyden Fabhcun has elected to follow a course through these mines as the gazriin ezen’s memories dictate it to him. It is the most direct path; however, it is not the only one. Unlike the Elf, I have considered alternatives based on the memories of the baga’han mage -- alternatives that will lead us to the lair ahead of them. It is fortunate for you that the false one surrounds himself with idiots, as well.”

Targutai blinked at her, somewhat abashed. “I did not mean that,” he mumbled, looking down at the ground.

“We should not tarry,” Mongoljin said. “I have returned to you as quickly as I was able.” She offered her hand to Targutai. “Climb astride the semamitan, my Kagan. It will bear you on swift winds.”

Targutai looked up at the bat, craning his head back, his eyes widening. “You mean we have to fly on those things?”

“You will soon be flying astride dragons, my Kagan,” Mongoljin said. “In the meantime, yes, the semamitan will carry you. They are primitive creatures, readily controlled with only a modicum of hiimori. They are swift in flight. With them, we can the distance between us and the Oirat in little time.”

Targutai grinned. “Do you hear that, Megetu?” he asked, looking over his shoulder at the eunuch. “We get to fly!”

Megetu looked between the bats and Mongoljin with thinly veiled mistrust. *Splendid*, he thought.

“How do I get on this thing?” Targutai asked, striding boldly toward one of the beasts. He hooked his hands in its fur and hopped up and down, pedaling his legs rather helplessly, punting the semamitan repeatedly in the ribs. “Megetu, help me!”

As Megetu passed Mongoljin, the two of them locked gazes, each of them turning their heads to glare at one another. Targutai did not notice; he was too busy trying to scrabble astride the bat. Megetu stooped, hooking his palm beneath Targutai’s gutal and offering him a boost. Targutai snatched hold of the semamitan’s scruff and swung his leg over its shoulder, situating himself comfortably behind its head. His nose wrinkled and he grimaced. “It stinks.”

“You will not notice, my Kagan, once the wind is in your face,” Mongoljin said as she swung herself astride another semamitan.

“It stinks really bad,” Targutai said. “Could you not have found something less stinky for me to ride? These are fine for the Minghan -- they are accustomed to foul odors -- but I am the Kagan. The dragons will not smell like this, will they? If they do, I should just let the Oirat have them.” He turned his head, making a melodramatic retching sound.

Megetu and the other Minghan approached the remaining bats warily, meaning to mount them. Just as Megetu reached out, his fingers splayed to catch hold of the bat’s furry breast, all of the semamitan flapped their wings, rising into the air. They flapped again, lifting themselves beyond the arm’s reach of any of the Minghan, and Megetu whirled in new alarm to Mongoljin.

“Put them down,” he said.

Targutai looked down at him, leaning over his bat’s shoulder. He turned to Mongoljin, confused. “Put them down,” he said. “Megetu and the others have not mounted yet. They are my soldiers. I need them.”

Indeed you do, Mongoljin said within Megetu’s mind. The corner of her mouth lifted in a fleeting, wry smile. It was a sneaky little ‘I-am-one-up-on-you’ smile, and it made the flesh along Megetu’s arms crawl.

“If we encounter Kelet, your Minghan must be ready to fight,” Mongoljin said aloud to Targutai. She lifted her hand in the air, and the semamitan reached out with their hind claws, grasping Megetu and the soldiers by their armor-padded shoulders. Megetu yelped in start as he was yanked off the ground and his guta soles drummed in the open air as he squirmed helplessly.

“This will save them the time wasted dismounting,” Mongoljin said. “They can simply be dropped into any fray.”

Targutai watched Megetu and the Minghan all dancing and yowling for a moment, and then he laughed. “Idiots,” he remarked, shaking his head.

Mongoljin opened her mouth and a shrill, peculiar caw uttered from her throat. At this seeming beckon, the semamitan flapped their immense wings, all of them swooping away at sudden, breath-snatching speed down the tunnel. The torches all immediately snuffed against the rushing wind, plunging them into utter darkness. Terrified, Megetu drew his arms toward his head, crossing them protectively in front of his face as the bat twisted and writhed in the air, whipping around corners and darting through tangled passageways. Megetu could hear Targutai ahead of him, his voice shrill with delight.

“This is magnificent!” Targutai screamed. “I am flying!”

Magnificent, my ass, Megetu thought, as his bat cut around a bend too sharply, and his legs went careening into the side of the tunnel, battering against the stone.

They traveled that way for what seemed like an eternity to Megetu, the bats sailing through the darkness, the Minghan being bounced and bashed against the tunnel walls. The bat claws did not hurt them; the thick, fur lined padding of the soldiers’ armor on their shoulders and chest protected them from that -- but it did not protect them from the brutal impact of the ground. After a seemingly endless flight through the

black passageways of the mines, all at once, Megetu felt the semamitan's talons open, releasing him from its grasp. His eyes flew wide, and he sucked in a whooping gasp to scream. He fell like a stone, slamming into the dirt some twenty feet below. He struck hard enough to *whoof* the breath from his lungs, and he bounced like a rag doll dropped from a bed, rolling and tumbling before coming to a stop on his belly, his face in the dirt. He groaned, shoving his palms beneath him and raising his head.

He could not see anything in the pitch black, but he heard the startled cries, the distinctive thuds and breathless yelps of the other Minghan smacking down around him. Megetu drew his legs beneath him, grimacing in pain as he limped to his feet.

"What...what happened...?" he heard one of the Minghan ask. He heard more pained moans, more hurting gasps and the scrabbling of gutaal soles in loose gravel as one by one, the Minghan stumbled upright.

"The bitch dropped us here," Megetu hissed, looking up in the direction of the ceiling. "She is leaving us behind."

Not without good purpose, Megetu, he heard Mongoljin say inside of his mind. He whirled, and drew back a staggering step, drawing his hands to his eyes.

Mongoljin approached, emerging from the darkness. This was her spirit form, not Yisun's body. That remained astride the bat somewhere above them, long gone along the tunnel. This was Mongoljin's *ami*, her true form; a disheveled, nude creature, still sodden and dripping with the tainted waters of the Tengriss. She approached, her long black hair hanging in her face, clinging in damp tendrils to her cheeks and forehead. Her body glowed; dim, pale light surrounding her. It was not much of a glow, but it was enough after so much time spent blind to dazzle the Minghan, and they cowered from her, gasping and crying out in startled alarm.

"What purpose?" Megetu asked, curling his fingers around his scimitar hilt.

He saw the corner of her mouth hook. *You are the clever one, eunuch,* she said. *You tell me.*

"You mean to go on without us," Megetu said. "You mean for us to die in these tunnels while you deliver the boy to the lair."

Yes, and no, Mongoljin replied, still smiling.

"I will not let you," Megetu said. His brows furrowed, his mouth turning down in a menacing frown. He jerked his sword from his belt and walked toward her, spinning the hilt against his palm and clasping it lightly at the ready. "I swore promise to my Qatun'Eke -- the boy's mother -- that I would give my life to see him safe. I mean to keep my word."

I am your Qatun'Eke now, Mongoljin told him. She raised her head, her hair parting from her face to reveal her black eyes. At her gaze, Megetu froze in mid-step, paralyzed where he stood as if grasped by an unyielding, invisible hand. He clenched his teeth and grunted, struggling vainly to move. *And I am Targutai's mother.*

"You are not his mother," Megetu hissed, the veins standing out in his neck as he hunched his shoulders, straining his muscles, fighting against her grip.

I am the only mother he has now, Mongoljin said. *I am the only mother he will ever again need or know, eunuch. I have loved Targutai for ten thousand of your lifetimes. I have waited an eternity for his birth -- for this, the moment of his destiny. I love him more than Yisun Goyaljin could ever hope to. I love him more than you will ever know.*

"I...will not let you..." Megetu seethed.

You have sworn your life to him, and I will hold you to that, eunuch, Mongoljin said. *There are Oirat who have survived my semamitan -- including the Elf, Rhyden Fabhcun. They are following the tunnel in which we now stand. They will be upon you shortly. You will not allow them to pass. If they best you, they will reach us -- and they will kill Targutai. You will keep them from this. You will kill them first.*

"And if I do?" Megetu asked.

Mongoljin's smile broadened. *If you succeed...and if you survive...you will all be rewarded. We will come for you when we have claimed the dragons. You will each be among the first -- the new generation of Khahl dragonriders.*

"You lie," Megetu said. "You are made of lies, Mongoljin. You did not cause the landslides beyond the threshold. The Oirat boy did -- the false one -- did he not? He drove you back from them. His hiimori is greater than yours."

She stared at him, her brows narrowing over her black eyes.

“You lied again -- you did not kill the false one because you need him,” Megetu said. “You need him to open the lair.”

Targutai will open the lair, Mongoljin hissed.

“Oirat shamans tricked the Tengri,” Megetu said. “They made them think false boy is the Negh -- and gave him the Dologhon marks, the blue gerel. You know the dragons will not be fooled by your deceit -- your false light and Yisun’s burned marks. I know the truth -- and you know it, too. The Tengri made a mistake -- but you know they will stand by it, and the false one.”

You know the truth, eunuch? Mongoljin asked, and something unseen suddenly clamped against Megetu’s throat, crushing the breath from him. He gagged, trying to suck air into his lungs desperately, to no avail. She began to laugh, the sound of a sharpened edge of steel scraping against stone. *I have told you -- you are not nearly as clever as you think.*

She released him from her grip, and he stumbled, collapsing to his knees, clutching at his throat. He gasped for breath, choking.

And nowhere near as indisposable, Mongoljin said. She looked around at the Minghan, who shied from her gaze. *I had hoped I might be able to trust you yet, to see you to your word, Megetu...*

She walked toward him, genuflecting. He felt her icy fingertips cradle beneath his chin, lifting his gaze from the ground. *I had hoped you would defend your Kagan against his enemies, the Oirat, and keep them from us,* she said. *But I can see now that I was mistaken.*

“You are his enemy,” Megetu seethed, trying to pull away from her as she cupped his face with her hands. She had the strength of forty men at least in her palms; he was helpless against her.

No, Megetu, Mongoljin purred, leaning toward him, canting her head to kiss him. *I am not Targutai’s enemy. I am yours.*

Toghrul and Rhyden had been limping along the tunnel for the better part of an hour. Along the way, Rhyden had found a beam of wood lying on the ground, a slender shaft that stood taller than he did from end to end, but was slender enough that he could

grasp it in hand and use it as a makeshift crutch to lean on as they walked along. The two moved in relative silence. There was little point in conversation, as Rhyden still could not hear anything, and he could only vaguely distinguish words Toghrul spoke by watching the man's lips move. They were both aching, weary and frustrated and had found no signs whatsoever of Aigiarn, Temu or the semamitan that had abducted them.

"We should be nearly to the armory now," Rhyden said as they paused to rest. The bleeding had staved at Toghrul's hips, but the bahadur was still in a great deal of pain from his wounds. He had refused Rhyden's repeated attempts to look at him, dress the gashes as best he could, and though he struggled diligently not to let his pain be too apparent, the times in which they would stop, and Toghrul would lean against a wall to rest were growing more and more frequent.

Rhyden looked down the passageway, narrowing his brows. "It should be just ahead of us. Mongoljin would have brought them there -- it is the entrance to the lair's passages. She must know that. She must have learned somehow...from Yeb, maybe, or the Abhacan gazriin ezen, like I did."

He had told Toghrul the full truth, everything Temu had told him about the night's events. There was no point in keeping it secret any longer. Whatever strength Mongoljin had summoned as her own from the hiimori of other shamans had made itself known to them already.

If she did not simply kill them, Toghrul said, the burden of his sorrow, his hopelessness nearly palpable.

"She would not kill them," Rhyden insisted. "Even with the Dologhon marks burned onto Targutai -- even with Trejaeran's gerel -- she has to know that it will not work. It could not work. The Khahl need Temu to..."

His voice faded, and he turned to Toghrul, blinking in wonder. He found Toghrul regarding him with equal surprise.

"I heard you," Rhyden whispered. "In my mind -- I heard your thoughts, Toghrul."

Toghrul stood away from the wall, wincing. "How?" he said. "I thought the manang -- the shroud -- blocked your hiimori."

As he spoke aloud, his words automatically echoed in his mind, and Rhyden understood him plainly. "It did," he said, turning to look again down the corridor. "Temu was blocking it -- blocking us all -- to protect us from Mongoljin."

Something has happened to him, Toghrol thought, his mind and heart filled with sudden, tremulous alarm.

"I do not know," Rhyden replied quietly. He closed his eyes, opening his mind tentatively, trying to extend his sight. *It is a tricky thing,* he said inside of Toghrol's mind. With his eyes closed, his attention elsewhere, he did not notice Toghrol's reaction to this unfamiliar sensation; the bahadur recoiled, stumbling back, his eyes flown wide in surprise, his hands darting for his temples.

Temu used a lot of power last night, from the way he described it to me, Rhyden said. *It would have weakened him. Somehow, he was able to maintain the manang, but not on purpose. He does not even realize he is doing it, much less how. The manang lowered last night, and Mongoljin was able to attack Yeb, because Temu focused all of his energy, his hiimori on something else -- moving the gate.*

"It is tricky like that," Rhyden murmured aloud, trying to sense Temu. "Sometimes when you do one thing with it, it does not leave you strong enough to do another."

Do you think that is what has happened? Toghrol asked him, experimenting hesitantly, trying to see if Rhyden could hear his thoughts. Rhyden could sense his simultaneous apprehension and curiosity, and he smiled slightly, amused.

"It might be," he said aloud. "If Temu has tried to fight the semamitan...or if he is injured somehow, or frightened, he might have lowered the manang. I doubt he even realizes that he has done it."

Can you sense him? Toghrol asked. *Can you sense Aigiarn? Are they alright?*

"At the moment, no," Rhyden replied. He glanced at Toghrol, opening one eye. "My mind cannot do two things at once, either."

Toghrol blinked at him. *Sorry.*

"It is alright," Rhyden said. He closed his eye again and returned his attention to the tunnels. He opened his mind wide and unencumbered; whatever had happened to Temu's shroud, it had dissolved in full. Rhyden's sight was fully restored and strong within him. *Temuchin,* he called out. *Temu, it is Rhyden. Can you hear me?*

Temu's voice ripped through his head, so bright and vivid that Rhyden staggered back, dropping his staff and collapsing to his knees, shoving his palm against his brow. "Hoah -- !" he gasped.

Rhyden, I am here! Temu screamed. It was not a terrified sensation within Rhyden; rather, it was joyous, exuberant, as though Temu was filled with tremendous relief. *We are both here -- me and Mamma! Rhyden!*

Hoah, lad, Rhyden thought, gasping again, managing a smile. Temu's presence was radiant within him, nearly visible as blue light before his eyes. It was as if Rhyden knelt in the middle of a broad, warm sunbeam, bathed in its glow. *I am here, too. Do not be frightened. Toghrul and I are coming. We are coming for you.*

"Are you alright?" Toghrul asked, kneeling beside him, touching Rhyden's shoulder. Rhyden opened his eyes, blinking at him. "You fell. Are you alright? Did you sense them?"

"I sense them," Rhyden said, nodding, and Toghrul heaved a tremendous sigh of relief, his entire body slouching with the release.

"Tengri be praised," he whispered. "Are they alright?"

Temu, are you hurt? Rhyden asked. *Is Aigiarn alright? Are either of you injured? Mamma is hurt,* Temu said. *She says she is not, but I know she is. I knew even before I could sense it in her. She is being stubborn.*

Rhyden laughed again softly. "I cannot imagine that."

"What?" Toghrul asked.

"They are alright," Rhyden told him. "Injured somewhat, but they are both able to move."

Where are you, Rhyden? Temu asked. *We have been trying to find you. We have been walking, but there is nothing but more tunnels. We thought we turned back -- headed toward you, but now Mamma is not sure. She thinks we are lost.*

Stop moving, Temu, Rhyden said. *You and Aigiarn both stay where you are.*

He closed his eyes again, reaching out with his mind. *Show me where you are, Temu,* he thought. *Show me in your mind. Do you have a lamp? Hold it up. Let me see.*

He looked around the confines of the tunnel through Temu's senses, studying the passageway Aigiarn and Temu followed. He used the memories the Abhacan gazriin

ezen had forced into his mind to orient himself to their direction, to estimate their location based on what he saw and sensed around them.

Through Temu's eyes, Rhyden could see Aigiarn sitting on the ground, her shoulder against the wall, her face ashen. She was trembling, her hips gored, her hand pressed beneath her bosom. It hurt her to breathe; she had broken ribs somehow, and she hiccupped for shallow breath. Rhyden could feel her pain because Temu could and he gasped softly, wanting to reach for her, to hold her, comfort her.

Aigiarn... he thought, anguished. She could not hear him because she did not have hiimori like Temu did, and she was too far away for him to reach without it. She could not hear him, but she looked at Temu, and her lovely mouth, battered and bloodied, lifted in a soft smile. Her dark eyes filled with tears, and she whispered his name, as if she somehow could feel him with her. "Rhyden..."

Aigiarn, I love you, he said. *I am here. I am right here. I am with you.*

Mamma says she loves you, too, Temu said, and Rhyden lowered his head, tears stinging his eyes. He smiled gently.

"Where are they?" Toghrul asked.

"Less than a mile ahead of us, I think," Rhyden said. "They have been trying to make their way back, but they were going that way..." He pointed ahead of them along the tunnel. "The wrong way by mistake."

"Tell them not to move any further," Toghrul said, grasping Rhyden by the sleeve. "Tell them to keep where they are -- to look for our light. We are coming for them."

Temu, do not move, Rhyden said. *You are going the wrong way. Toghrul and I are behind you. Stay where you are and we will come to you. We have a lamp with us, too. Look to your right -- look for our light.*

Temu did not answer, and Rhyden's smile faded, shifting into a puzzled frown.
Temu?

Did you feel that, Rhyden? Temu whispered, his voice suddenly tremulous.

Feel what? Rhyden asked, and then a chill shivered through him. It felt like an icy wind had just rushed past him and in his mind, he could see something -- shadows against the backdrop of dark passageways, moving swiftly, darting through the tunnels.

Rhyden's eyes flew open wide at the sensation, his breath tangling in his throat. "Temu -- !" he gasped.

"What is it?" Toghrul asked, alarmed by Rhyden's expression. He grasped Rhyden by the arm again, giving him a firm shake to draw his gaze. "What is it?"

"We have to move," Rhyden said. "They are in trouble. We have to go right now." Inside his mind, he said, *Temu -- you and Aigiarn stay right where you are. We are coming.*

Rhyden, there is something out there, Temu said.

Stay right where you are, Temu, Rhyden said again, frantic, as Toghrul clasped hands with him, hauling him to his feet.

It is Mongoljin, Temu said. *I can feel her.*

I can feel her, too, Rhyden said grimly, nodding.

She is riding the semamitan, Temu thought. *She is coming right toward us.*

"Go," Rhyden said to Toghrul, shoving the tip of his wooden staff into the dirt and struggling to hurry forward. "Go -- go now. We have to move."

"Is it the Kahl?" Toghrul asked, drawing his scimitar in hand. He saw Rhyden's grave expression, and his eyes widened. "It is Mongoljin? Tengri ibegel bide," he whispered. *Tengri help us.*

Rhyden, I am frightened, Temu whimpered in Rhyden's mind.

We are coming, Temu, Rhyden thought. *Stay where you are and wait for us. She will not reach you before we do. By my breath, Temu, she will not.*

"Temu, I...I have to rest," Aigiarn said, stumbling to a halt, leaning against the tunnel wall. She trembled with fatigue and pain, struggling to breathe around her broken ribs, and she closed her eyes, panting quietly, her breath fluttering from her throat. "Just for a moment, oyotona."

"Alright, Mamma," Temu said. He kept his arm about her waist, kneeling as he helped her slump into a seated position against the ground. He set the lamp on the ground in front of them. They were running dangerously low on oil, and Temu had dimmed the wick nearly flush with the lip of the lamp to try and preserve as much fuel as he could. It offered only a dim glow now, barely enough life to surround the two of them

huddled together. It cast more shadows than it offered illumination, but he did not dare to raise the wick any higher.

“I think I made a mistake,” Aigiarn said. She opened her eyes and looked at her son. “We should have reached them by now. The bats could not have carried us this far away. We have been walking at least an hour. I think we are going in the wrong direction. I think we are lost.”

“We are not,” Temu said. He carried her waterskin fettered to his sash to lighten the burden on her injured body. He unfastened it now and offered it to her, helping hold it up to her face as she took a drink. “How can we be lost along a straight path? So we went the wrong way. We just turn around and go back the other.”

Aigiarn smiled at him, water glistening against her lower lip. She stroked her hand against his face. “Alright, Temu.”

“Anyway, I have been thinking, Mamma,” Temu said, sitting on the ground. He took a sip of water and then offered the skin again to Aigiarn, who shook her head. “Maybe Rhyden cannot hear us, or we cannot hear him, but there is still a way we can reach him, let him know where we are, what has happened. He cannot use his hiimori because of the manang -- but I am the one who has made the manang somehow, Mamma. Rhyden could use his hiimori again -- he could sense us with his mind -- if I just make the shroud go away.”

“Temu, no,” Aigiarn said. “You told me your hiimori was weak now. You cannot --”

“It is weak because of last night -- and because I am somehow still holding a manang around us,” Temu said. “I do not know how, but I do know how to make it stop, I think.” She looked at him, curious. “Last night, when I moved the gate, the manang went away. Trejaeran sensed it -- and Mongoljin did, too. That is how she was able to attack him and Yeb. If I am trying to do something else with my hiimori, it must make the manang weaken. Like I cannot do two things that are really big all at once with it. So if I try to use my hiimori now -- if I try to do something big, like move something, maybe I can make the manang go away long enough for Rhyden to sense us, see where we are.”

Aigiarn shook her head. “No,” she said again. “It could hurt you. We will turn around, go back the way we came. We will keep calling for Rhyden. He will hear us.”

“We have been calling, Mamma,” Temu said, taking her hand, drawing her gaze. “We have shouted ourselves hoarse. No one has answered us. Maybe...” He blinked, his eyes glassy in the dim glow with tears. “Maybe there is no one left to answer. Maybe the semamitan killed them all.”

“Temu, no,” Aigiarn said, sitting up. “You cannot think that. We do not know -- ”

“You have thought it all along,” Temu said quietly, drawing her voice to a halt. “I do not need hiimori to know that, Mamma.”

“Rhyden is not dead,” Aigiarn said.

“We will know for sure if I make the manang go away,” Temu said. “He has hiimori. I will be able to sense him, just like he could me.”

“He is alive,” Aigiarn insisted. “He is alive, and he is looking for us, Temu. I know he is.”

“Then either way, getting rid of the manang will help. I am going to try, Mamma. There is no other way. We are almost out of lamp oil. Another half-hour, maybe less, and we will have no light. We cannot stumble around the tunnels blind, Mamma. Please, let me try.”

Aigiarn looked at him for a long moment. “You sound like your father,” she said quietly and Temu blinked at her, caught off guard.

“What?”

“That sounded like something Yesugei might have said,” Aigiarn told him. “You have his sensibility about you, you know.” She brushed her fingertips through his hair. “Sometimes, you remind me very much of him.”

“Really?” Temu whispered.

Aigiarn smiled, nodding. “Yes, really.” She blinked against tears and cradled his cheek against her palm. “He wanted you so much, Temu. He was so happy when you were born, and he loved you so very, very much. I am sorry I have never told you. I am sorry that my pain in remembering has kept you from knowing that, understanding. Yesugei loved you, Temu. Being your father brought him the greatest joy he ever knew.”

She closed her eyes, a solitary tear trailing down her cheek. Temu turned his face against her hand. "Thank you, Mamma," he whispered.

"Here, Temu," she said, and she moved, grimacing as she reached for her bogcu. She felt around inside the pouch and then pulled something out, holding it tucked against her palm, hidden by her closed fingers. She opened her hand, offering it to him, and Temu gasped softly in surprise.

"My ongon!" He blinked at Aigiarn in confusion. "But at Tolui Bay, I threw it..."

"Rhyden found it," Aigiarn said, pressing it against Temu's hand. "He thought I should hold onto it for you...that you might want to carry it with you again someday." She met his gaze and smiled. "Maybe it will help you lower the manang."

Temu held the ongon cradled in his hand for a long, uncertain moment. At last, he took the loop of sinew and draped it around his neck, ducking his head, letting the talisman pouch come to rest at its customary place against his heart. He closed his fingers about it, feeling the hard press of his father's tooth inside, and he looked up at his mother. "Thank you, Mamma."

"So what do you do?" Aigiarn asked. She looked around at their meager supplies -- the waterskin, lamp, the few contents of their bogcus. "What do you need to move to make the manang stop?"

"I do not think anything big this time," he said. "My hiimori is still weak. I can tell. It probably would not take much." He lifted the waterskin in hand, as if considering its heft. "This might work."

He set it on the ground in front of him and looked at it.

"What do you do?" Aigiarn asked.

Temu shrugged. "Trejaeran told me all I have to do is focus all of my energy on something and then push it out of me." He studied the waterskin, his brows narrowing as he tried to concentrate. Aigiarn fell silent beside him, leaning against the wall again, pressing her hand beneath her bosom and against her aching ribs.

Point your mind toward it, and do not let it waver, Temu remembered Trejaeran telling him as they had stood together at the fortified gate of Heese. *You are earth and sky, Temu. The spirit of Ag'iamon is within you, just as he promised. You have his strength, his power.*

Temu stared at the waterskin, feeling the muscles bridging his neck and shoulders begin to tighten, his jaw settle as his back teeth pressed together tightly. *Move*, he thought, his brows furrowing deeply. *Move*.

Concentrate, Temu, Trejaeran's voice echoed in his mind. *Open your mind in full. Focus all of your energy on it.*

Move, Temu thought again, and there was nothing else but the waterskin; it was as if the earth beneath him, the dim glow of the lamp surrounding him, the cold air seeping through his clothing, even his mother less than an arm's reach away, had all faded into shadows. He saw only the waterskin, focused only on the pouch, his brows drawn together, his mouth turned in a determined line.

Move, he thought, folding his hands into fists. He could feel something within him, a slight shiver of energy rustling through him, and he focused on it, concentrating on that tremulous force. *Move*, he thought again, harnessing the energy within him, trying to force it from him, to shove it against the waterskin.

"Move!" he cried, and he jerked, his head snapping back on his neck. The waterskin jumped as though it were caught on a line and snapped backward; it skittered across the gravel-strewn ground, sliding fifteen feet away from them before coming to a clumsy, spinning halt.

Temu crumpled forward, catching himself with his hands before he pitched face-first to the ground. His arms trembled; he felt weak and sapped, as though every ounce of his strength had just been summoned and expended. He felt Aigiarn's arms drape about him and he huddled against her chest, shuddering.

"You did it, Temu," she whispered, stroking his hair, kissing him. "You moved it. I saw it. Oh, oyotona, you did it." She sounded incredulous, awestruck and frightened all at once. She could see that whatever he had done, whatever power he had called forth had stripped him of his strength and left him frail in its aftermath. She cradled him in her arms, kissing him over and over. "You did it."

"I...I moved the bag," Temu said softly. He raised his head from Aigiarn's shoulder, moaning softly as the horizon side-slipped before his eyes. "But did the manang...?"

“Is it gone?” Aigiarn asked, keeping her hand pressed against his back, supporting him. “Temu, is the shroud gone?”

“I do not know,” Temu whispered. He closed his eyes, brushing his fingertips against his temple. He tried to open his mind, to search for Rhyden’s presence -- the golden glow of his gerel within his mind, but there was nothing. He was exhausted, and his hiimori was nearly depleted. “I cannot tell, Mamma. I...I cannot...”

Temuchin, he heard Rhyden call within his mind, and at this beckon, the sound of Rhyden’s voice, whatever frailty that had come over Temu seemed to dissipate, overcome by bright, sudden hope. He could feel Rhyden within him now, a golden glow like sunshine spilling through curtains into a darkened room, and Temu’s eyes flew wide, his mouth spreading in a broad, overjoyed grin. *Temu, it is Rhyden. Can you hear me?*

“What is it?” Aigiarn asked. “Temu, do you sense something? What is it?”

Rhyden, I am here! Temu cried out in his mind. *We are both here -- me and Mamma! Rhyden!*

He turned to Aigiarn, tears gleaming in his eyes. “It is Rhyden!” he cried, and Aigiarn gasped, her hand darting to her mouth. “It is Rhyden, Mamma! He is calling for me! I can hear him inside my mind! He is alive!”

Aigiarn watched, wide-eyed and nearly breathless with wonder, as her son carried on a seemingly silent conversation with Rhyden inside of his mind. Temu seemed to stare right through her, his eyes distant, his head cocked at a slight angle, as if he listened to something faint upon a breeze. His mouth was caught in a smile, and after a moment, he blinked, settling his gaze on his mother.

“They are coming,” he said. “Rhyden and Toghrul -- they are coming for us.”

“Where are they?” Aigiarn asked.

“I do not know,” Temu said. His gaze wandered again, as though he daydreamed. His eyelids drooped sleepily. He sat quietly for a moment and then nodded slowly. “He said for us to stay here,” he murmured to Aigiarn, his eyes still dreamy. He lifted his chin and looked around the corridor, panning his gaze slowly. “He wants to see where we are. He is looking through my eyes.”

He turned to her, looking at her for a long moment. "He sees you," Temu whispered. "Rhyden sees you, Mamma."

Tears sprang to her eyes. She smiled softly, her breath hitching in her throat. "Rhyden..."

"He says he loves you," Temu said. "He says he is here. He is right here with you."

Aigiarn gasped, her smile widening even as her tears spilled. "Tell him I love him, too," she said. "Can you tell him that, Temu? I love him, too."

Temu canted his face again, as if listening. "Rhyden says not to move, Mamma. We are going the wrong way."

I knew it, Aigiarn thought, shaking her head, frustrated with herself.

"They have a lamp," Temu said, and he looked over his right shoulder. "He says to look for their light. They are coming for us."

The boy's expression shifted, his brows pinching slightly, his mouth turning in a frown. All at once, he looked very grave and intense, and Aigiarn leaned toward him, concerned. "Temu?" she said, touching his sleeve. "What is it? What did Rhyden say?"

Temu shook his head at her without answering. He held his hand up to her, staying her and she fell silent. *He senses something*, she thought, a trill of alarm shivering through her. She followed his gaze, staring down the tunnel into darkness, trying to feel what he felt.

"There is something out there," Temu whispered, his voice tremulous. His eyes darted toward the ceiling, and then away again, scanning for something among the shadows. "Mamma, something is coming."

Aigiarn followed his gaze again, her hand brushing against the ground beside her, her fingers hooking about the hilt of her scimitar.

"Rhyden feels it, too," Temu said softly.

"Mongoljin," Aigiarn hissed, closing her hand about her sword. *Tengerii boshig, when Temu made the manang go away, she must have sensed us -- just like Rhyden did, and just like she sensed it last night, when she attacked Yeb and Trejaeran.*

"She is coming," Temu whimpered, frightened.

“She cannot have you,” Aigiarn said, her brows furrowed. She shoved her elbow against the wall, leaning heavily as she forced her gutal beneath her and struggled to rise. “I...I will not let her.”

“She is riding the semamitan,” Temu said softly, his eyes widening with horror. “She knows secret paths, Mamma. They are following the tunnels...Mongoljin and Targutai. They are following other tunnels to lead them here.”

“Come on,” Aigiarn said, staggering in place, gritting her teeth as a spasm of pain speared through her ribs. “Temu, come on. Get up. We...we cannot...”

“Rhyden said to stay right here,” Temu said, looking up at her. “He is coming. He and Toghrul are coming for us.”

“Will they reach us in time?” Aigiarn asked.

Temu blinked up at her, his eyes round and filled with fear. “I do not know, Mamma. She...” His voice faded, and his eyes widened all the more. He scrambled to his feet, stumbling backwards, gasping in fright.

“What is it?” Aigiarn asked, spinning her scimitar against her palm, leveling it at the ready.

“She is here!” Temu stared down the darkened tunnel. “They are in the tunnel! There are Minghan with them -- she left them behind.” He looked up at Aigiarn, stricken. “Between us and Rhyden. I can see them, Mamma. She left them between us so that Rhyden and Toghrul could not pass. She is coming...!”

“Warn Rhyden,” Aigiarn said. She stooped, wincing as she grabbed the lamp, passing it to Temu. She grabbed him by the arm and began to move, dragging him in tow as she tried to run. “Warn Rhyden, Temu -- tell him they are coming!”

“Mamma, wait!” Temu said, stumbling along with her as she lurched down the passage. “Mamma, this is the wrong way. Rhyden said -- ”

“It is the only way, Temu,” Aigiarn said. Every step she forced her body to take was excruciating. She clenched her teeth, her brows furrowed deeply with determination. “The only way we have left. Come on -- she will not have you. I swear to you, Temu -- I will not let Mongoljin find us.”

Chapter Ten

Aigiarn and Temu staggered along the tunnel together. Aigiarn leaned heavily against her son, her arm draped over his shoulder, her face twisted with pain. She kept sparing darting, frantic glances over her shoulder, watching for any signs of movement in the passage behind them. "Where is she now?"

"I do not know," Temu said. "I cannot tell. She is close, Mamma."

"Keep moving," Aigiarn said. "If she comes upon us, I want you to run, Temu. I want you to follow this tunnel and run away, hide from her."

"Mamma, no," Temu said, his eyes widening with fear as he shook his head.

"Yes," Aigiarn said, looking at him sternly. "You will run away and you will call your manang back. You will block your hiimori and you will hide from her."

"What about you, Mamma?"

"Do not worry about me," Aigiarn said. "I will be alright. You just keep away from her."

She caught a hint of their lamplight dancing faintly off of something along the tunnel wall ahead of them, and she paused, frowning. "What is that?"

Temu saw it, too. "I do not know," he said. "It looks like a doorway or something carved into the rocks."

They limped toward it. They had passed by numerous tunnel entrances along the way, where smaller tributary passageways intersected with the one they followed. These had been marked simply by openings chiseled and hewn in the rocks, gaping archways of darkness along the granite walls. As they drew near, they could see this one was different. It was much smaller, and had been deliberately hewn, a threshold carved out of the mountain. An iron door rested on thick hinges in the doorway, closed to the tunnel.

"What is it?" Temu asked as they stood in front of it, staring at it.

"It is the armory," Aigiarn whispered, her eyes widening in realization. "Rhyden said we would come to an iron door -- an old baga'han armory." She looked down at Temu. "He said the entrance to the lair tunnel is hidden inside. Maybe we have been

going the right way after all.” She lifted her arm from Temu’s shoulders and stepped away from him, limping to the door. “Hold the light up, Temu.”

There was no locking mechanism that she could see, only a large, heavy iron ring to serve as a door handle. Aigiarn grasped the ring between her hands and planted her feet, pulling against it. The effort sent a staggering bolt of pain through her body, and she cried out, stumbling sideways, her hands darting for her ribs.

“Mamma!” Temu cried, rushing to her side, putting his arm around her.

“I...I am alright,” Aigiarn gasped. She looked at the door, her brows pinched. “It is not locked but it is heavy. I cannot pull it, not with my ribs...” She looked down at her son. “Can you open it, Temu? It is very heavy. You will have to pull really hard.”

Temu blinked uncertainly at the door. “I can try, Mamma.” He helped her limp toward the wall, and stepped away from her as she leaned against it, panting for breath. He took the iron ring in hand, claspng both fists about it. He spread his little feet wide and heaved mightily against the door, gritting his teeth, straining until his arms trembled and his gutal soles skittered for purchase against the ground. After a long moment’s struggle, he let go, staggering, gasping for breath. He turned to Aigiarn in dismay. “It is too heavy,” he said. “We need Rhyden and Toghrul, Mamma. They could open it.”

“Mongoljin will be here first,” Aigiarn said. She shambled to the door again, grimacing with each shuffling step. “Here. We will both try.”

“Mamma, no,” Temu said. “Please, you are hurt. We cannot -- ”

“Mongoljin is coming, Temu,” Aigiarn said, her grave expression stilling his voice. “We have no choice -- the lair is beyond this door. We have to get inside. Now grab hold of the ring with me, and we will pull together.”

Temu nodded, his eyes swimming with tears. He and Aigiarn grasped the ring in their hands, and he looked up at her. “On three, alright?” Aigiarn said, and he nodded again. “One...two...three...pull, Temu!”

They both strained together, hauling with all of their might. Aigiarn cried out sharply, jerking away from the door and collapsing on her side, writhing. “Mamma!” Temu screamed, falling beside her, clutching at her. “Mamma! Mamma!”

“Damn it!” Aigiarn gasped, her eyes closed, her brows furrowed. The pain had been bright enough to bring tears to her eyes, send them streaming down her cheeks.

She drew her knees to her chest, shoving her hands beneath her breasts. “Damn it...damn it!” Her voice dissolved into agonized groans, and she began to shudder. Blood peppered out of her mouth in a light spray, and Temu recoiled, whimpering in fright.

“Mamma!” he said.

“I...I am alright...” Aigiarn wheezed, a lie Temu did not believe for a moment. “I...give me...a...a moment, Temu...I...we...we have to try...again...”

“No,” Temu said, leaning over her.

She opened her eyes. “We have to,” she hissed, blood dribbling from her lips. She moaned, turning her head to the side and spitting weakly. “We...we have to get through the...the door...”

“Then I will do it,” Temu said. He looked up at the door, his brows drawing together. “I will move it.”

“Temu...” Aigiarn said, reaching for him, and then she began to choke up blood. She gagged, rolling onto her side, whooping for breath as she spat out another mouthful of blood and spittle.

“I will do it, Mamma,” Temu whispered, staring at the door, his hands closing into fists. “I will. I can do it, Mamma...”

Aigiarn looked up at him in the waning lamplight and her breath stilled. She had never seen such a severe expression on her son’s face; he stared at the door as if he meant to bore holes straight through it with the simple intensity of his gaze.

“I will do it,” he said again, his small fists beginning to tremble, the cleft between his brows cleaving all the deeper. It was a trick of the light; surely, it was only Aigiarn’s own dazed senses, the feeble glow of their lamp, but she could have sworn that his eyes were aglow, a pale blue light seeping from beneath his eyelids.

“Move,” Temu whispered, his shoulders hunching as his body tensed, all of his muscles constricting. He stared at the door, his voice hissing from between clenched teeth. He held out his fist, his fingers uncurling slowly, stiffly, spreading wide. “Move.”

She heard the groan of ancient metal moving against weathered hinges, and she gasped, turning to look over her shoulder.

“Move,” Temu said, and the groaning grew louder. The carved stone threshold of the door began to splinters, miniscule cracks appearing, racing along the doorframe, a spiderweb of fissures cleaving in the granite. Rock dust and gravel sprinkled down to the ground, and Aigiarn blinked at her son in astonishment.

“Temu!” she breathed.

“Move,” Temu said, and the door squalled on its hinges, keening as if in protest. It began to swing outward, the thick lip of iron dragging in the dirt beneath it.

“Move,” Temu whispered, splaying his fingers in the air. He shoved his hand forward, and as he did, the door snapped as if it was on a spring. It swung open wide, smashing into the wall of the tunnel, crunching granite with its tremendous weight and sending a thunderous, resounding boom reverberating along the passageway.

Temu groaned, the tension draining abruptly from him. He clapped his hand over his face and slumped forward, swaying unsteadily. Aigiarn forced herself to sit up, pedaling her gutal against the ground, and reached for him, touching his shoulders. “Temu!”

“I...I am alright,” he whispered, his hand fumbling, pawing blindly, finding hers. “I am alright, Mamma.” He put his arm around her, tugging against her. “Come on, get up. We have to hurry.”

Aigiarn leaned against him, groaning as she staggered to her feet. “Come on,” Temu whispered as they stumbled together. “Come on, we have to -- ”

He jerked his head to look over his shoulder, his eyes flying wide. Aigiarn turned, and had a half-second to see something enormous rushing at them from out of the darkness -- a semamitan. She saw something bright blue, like a spear of fire ablaze above the black arch of the bat’s broad shoulder, and she hitched in a breath to scream.

“Get away from us!” Temu shouted, shoving his hand out at the semamitan, his fingers splayed. The bat wrenched in midair, close enough for their lamplight to drape across its immense form; close enough for Aigiarn to realize Targutai Bokedei rode astride it -- and that the blue spear of fire was Rhyden’s spirit sword, the anam’cladh, clenched in the Kagan’s right fist.

Aigiarn ducked her head reflexively, feeling the huff of wind from the bat’s wings tug at her hair, and then it careened backward, thrown like a boku ball across the

tunnel. Targutai uttered a sharp, startled cry and then the bat slammed into the wall and crashed to the ground, taking him with it.

“Go!” Temu said to Aigiarn, shrugging loose of her and giving her a shove, sending her stumbling across the threshold of the armory. “Go, Mamma -- hurry!”

More bats were upon them, swooping out of the darkness and Temu thrust both hands forward, his brows furrowed, his eyes ablaze with blue light again. “Get away!” he screamed, and Aigiarn blinked in shock as all of the semamitan -- twelve of them at least -- jerked in the air as if snagged by sudden leashes jerked taut. They sailed back, screeching and thrashing, smashing into the tunnel walls hard enough to send crumbled debris raining against the ground.

She caught a glimpse of one final bat darting toward them, and a pale figure astride it -- a woman with black hair whipping about her face, her mouth twisted in a ruthless, furious snarl. “Mongoljin!” she gasped, and she lurched forward, seizing Temu by the scruff of his del. She jerked him into the armory, and as she did, Temu shoved his right hand toward the iron door. It whipped on its hinges, slamming closed between them and Mongoljin. It smashed against its threshold with enough force to rive the stone in thick fissures from the ground to the ceiling; hard enough to wedge the door beyond its moorings, lodging it in place, immobilizing it.

Aigiarn and Temu shrank together, huddling as they heard the heavy, reverberating crash of Mongoljin’s semamitan slamming into the outer side of the door. The stone threshold groaned at the impact, and dust and grit spewed from its strained border, but the door held in place.

“Tengerii boshig...!” Aigiarn whispered. She and Temu blinked at one another in the dim glow of their lamp. “How...how did you do that?”

“I do not know,” he whispered back, his eyes enormous with fright.

“I thought your hiimori was weakened.”

“I thought so, too,” Temu said.

They jerked in simultaneous alarm as another tremendous thud fell against the door. “That will not keep them long,” Temu whispered. “Targutai has Trejaeran’s power now. I wedged the door in the stone...it is stuck, but together they can move it. We have to hurry, Mamma.”

“Rhyden said the door to the lair tunnel is hidden in here.” Aigiarn turned, staggering in a circle as she held the lamp aloft, surveying their surroundings. They were in a small chamber hewn from the granite. It had once served as an armory store room for the baga’han of Heese. She could see dilapidated, crumbling remnants of wooden shelving units and weapon racks listing along the walls. Most were empty; there were a few scattered piles of ancient plate armor, shields and blades heaped about the room. The walls uncovered by shelves were covered in relief sculptures, like the walls of the main corridor beyond the outer threshold, carvings depicting great battles the baga’han must have fought.

“Which wall?” Temu asked, as she limped across the room.

“I do not know,” Aigiarn replied. “Can you ask Rhyden?”

He did not answer her at first, and she glanced over her shoulder, wincing as another heavy boom shuddered from the doorway. “Temu, can you reach Rhyden? Tell him where we are. Ask him which...” Her voice faded as Temu stared at her, looking stricken.

“I cannot sense Rhyden anymore, Mamma.”

“What?”

“I cannot sense him,” Temu whimpered. “I...I do not know what has happened, but I cannot feel him in my mind.”

Aigiarn uttered a low, anguished sound. Her hand darted to her mouth as tears stung her eyes. For a moment, she wavered between shock and inconsolable grief, and then her brows furrowed. She lowered her hand, her mouth twisting in a frown. *No, she told herself. No, there is not time for this -- not for tears or for grief. Rhyden is not dead. I would know it in my heart if he was -- I would feel it somehow. He is not dead, and there is no time for tears.*

She turned back to the wall, reaching up and slapping her hands against the carvings. “It is here somewhere,” she hissed, inching her way along the wall, groping and pawing as she went. “Something here opens it. We just have to find it, that is all.”

She heard a peculiar hissing sound, and turned. She saw Temu crossing the floor slowly behind her. He held his ongon in his hand. He had opened the little pouch and was spilling something out of it against the ground -- Yesugei’s ashes. He was

drawing a thin line with the ashes across the room, whispering as he went. “Ene mor ayu manu jaqa,” he said. “Ta yadaqu getulku dotura ene yajar.” *This line shall be our border. You cannot pass into this place.*

“What are you doing?” Aigiarn asked.

Temu glanced up at her, hunkered over, walking backward as he sprinkled his father’s ashes in the dirt. “I am making a jaqa line, like Yeb showed me,” he said. “It will not stop them for long, but maybe for a moment...long enough.”

“Mongoljin crossed Yeb’s jaqa,” Aigiarn said. Temu had reached the far side of the room, finishing his line, and he straightened, looking at her.

“This is *my* jaqa,” he said. “And Father’s. He will keep them from us. I know he will. I believe it.”

He closed his fingers around the ongon and pressed it against his heart. “He will show me how to open the door,” he said. He stopped in the center of the room and closed his eyes. “I know he will do this, too. I believe in him.”

“Temu...” Aigiarn said, softly.

“Let me concentrate,” Temu said without opening his eyes. “Father will show me. He shows things only I can see -- no one else. I know it is him, not me. I know it.”

The iron door began to groan loudly, shifting in the stone frame. Aigiarn looked at it, her breath tangling in alarm. She could see the heavy plate of metal shivering slightly, as though it was tugged from the other side of the threshold. “Temu,” she whispered sharply.

“I know,” Temu said.

“Hurry, oyotona.”

“I know, Mamma.”

The grinding whine of the door grew louder, and Aigiarn heard the scraping of iron against the confines of stone as it began to move, inching outward on its hinges. “Tengerii boshig,” she whispered. She limped across the room, trying to hurry. She went to one of the piles of old armor and grabbed a shield. It was heavy; lifting it sent a spear of pain lancing through her, and she clenched her teeth against a cry. She sheathed her scimitar, struggling the strap the iron plate against her arm, her eyes darting again and

again to the door. It squalled now against its hinges, and she saw a sliver of darkness appear along its outer edge as it began to open. She turned to Temu. "Temuchin!"

"I know," he said again without opening his eyes. He clutched his ongon against his heart, whispering fervently. "I believe in you, Father. Show me what to do. Show me where to go. I believe in you."

The door screeched, a shrill, scraping sound, and the sliver of opening broadened. Aigiarn jerked her scimitar from its sheath and stumbled to the center of the room, claspng her fingers about the hilt, leveling the blade at the threshold.

Temu walked slowly across the chamber away from her, keeping his eyes closed, moving blindly. He kept the ongon against his breast with one hand and extended the other, his fingertips outstretched. "I believe in you," he whispered over and over, offering some sort of mantra. "I believe in you, Father."

Aigiarn glanced over her shoulder at him, and then turned back to the doorway, watching in horror as the door slowly swung outward. She shifted her weight, squaring her hips and shoulders and spun the hilt of the scimitar against her palm. "Whatever you are going to do, Yesugei, do it now," she whispered, her brows furrowing.

Temu draped his hand against one of the relief sculptures, rising on his tiptoes to reach it. "It is here," he said softly, and at his touch, Aigiarn heard a new groaning -- the sound of stone rumbling, scraping against stone. She turned and saw a large panel of the engraved wall sliding sideways, withdrawing into a hidden recess, revealing a dark opening beyond.

Temu looked back at her and smiled, tears in his eyes. "I knew it," he said. "I knew Father would show me the way."

The iron door screeched again, and they both jerked at the sound. The door had opened wide enough for Aigiarn to see the blue glow of Rhyden's sword beyond its edge; the sword Mongoljin had stolen and Targutai now carried. She whirled to Temu, her eyes flown wide. "Go!" she said. "Take the lamp and go!"

"But, Mamma -- !" Temu said.

"Go!" she cried. "Seal the door behind you -- use your power to close it! Go!" When he only stood there, rooted and trembling like a frightened lamb, she shoved her shield at him in emphatic direction. "Go, Temuchin!"

Temu grabbed the lamp, turned and darted through the doorway. She watched the golden circumference of lamplight splay against the tight confines of the cramped corridor beyond, bright at first, and then fading, as he ran away from the threshold. She heard the shuddering sound of stone moving again, and then the panel in the wall drew closed behind him, slamming into place once more. Darkness fell within the chamber and she stood alone, blind.

“Go,” she whispered, tears burning her eyes. She turned as she heard the iron door offer its last groan of protest, and then it yielded to the powers that hauled against it. It swung wide on its hinges, wrenching through stone, sending its frame of granite crumbling to the ground in its wake. A cloud of thick, gritty dust filled the doorway, a haze that seemed aglow with pale blue light from beyond the threshold. Aigiarn backpedaled, grasping her sword firmly in her hand, pivoting to position her shield in front of her.

“Come on, then,” she said, her brows narrowing. “By my breath, you will never have my son.”

Toghrul and Rhyden raced along the tunnel as fast as they could. “How much farther?” Toghrul asked, shoving his teeth together in a grimace against the stabbing pain in his hips.

“Not much,” Rhyden replied, swinging the shaft of wood in his hands, driving it down hard against the earth with each staggering, broad stride. He still could not hear, but he sensed Toghrul’s thoughts as they mirrored his dialogue. “They are...” He paused, stumbling to a clumsy halt, his eyes widening. “They are moving again.”

“What?” Toghrul asked, turning to him.

“They are moving again,” Rhyden said, meeting Toghrul’s bewildered gaze. “Away from us -- that way.” He pointed ahead of them along the tunnel.

Toghrul’s brows drew together. “That damn stubborn woman,” he said. “What is she doing? Can she not just do what she is told -- even once, can Aigiarn not -- ?”

“Toghrul!” Rhyden hissed, the sudden alarm in his face drawing Toghrul to silence. Rhyden took a hedging step backward, his eyes darting about the tunnel, his brows narrowing.

“What is it?” Toghrul asked. He turned again, following Rhyden’s gaze, scanning the tunnel. “What do you sense?”

“They are here,” Rhyden whispered. He shifted his grip against the spear of wood, his fingers moving slowly, deliberately. “I can feel them. They have entered the tunnel.”

“Where?” Toghrul asked, his voice falling to little more than a huff of breath. He relaxed his fingers, adjusting his grip against his hilt.

He glanced over his shoulder at Rhyden, and Rhyden nodded ahead of them. “There,” he whispered. “Ten of them. The bats are gone. Mongoljin and Targutai have gone ahead.” He winced, his fingertips brushing against his temple. “Aigiarn and Temu know it, too -- Temu sensed it. That is why they are moving. He is calling to me in warning.”

“Mongoljin and Targutai are going after Temu,” Toghrul said with a grim frown. Rhyden nodded.

“Ten, you said?” Toghrul asked, and Rhyden nodded again. “Between us and Temu? How good are these warrior skills your goddess gave to you?”

“They have always seemed to serve me well enough,” Rhyden said.

“Good,” Toghrul said. The two moved forward slowly, creeping like cats.

“Should we put out the lamp?” Rhyden whispered.

“Do not see the point in it,” Toghrul breathed back. “I think they know we are coming.”

“Hoah,” Rhyden said, nodding.

“They will be Minghan,” Toghrul said, glancing at him. “The Kagan’s imperial guard. Eunuchs for the most part -- trained since birth to fight and defend Targutai. They will have plate armor on, with scimitars and daggers. Maybe bows.”

“Eunuchs?” Rhyden asked, and Toghrul nodded. “There is rot luck for them.”

“I have never quite understood it myself,” Toghrul agreed.

The circumference of their lamp’s glow winked against steel, and Toghrul and Rhyden drew to halts. They could see the Minghan now in the passage ahead of them; ten brawny silhouettes framed by lamplight against the backdrop of darkness. The

Minghan had apparently seen them as well and fanned out slowly across the breadth of the tunnel, their hooked swords glinting, their footsteps deliberate as they approached.

“Bugger me,” Toghrul said.

“They are rather big fellows,” Rhyden said, raising his brow.

“Very big,” Toghrul agreed, sweeping his eyes across the encroaching Khahl. He and Rhyden began to move apart from one another, both of them squaring the shoulders at the Minghan.

“Getting their...you know, tender portions...whacked...” Rhyden flapped his hand at his crotch. “It does not stunt their growth?”

“Happens late in life,” Toghrul said. “They are chosen from birth, but allowed to mature. Around eighteen, I think is typical.”

Rhyden whirled the staff between his hands, gripping it lightly. “Hoah, those are the best years there,” he remarked. “At least for me, they were.”

“Me, too,” Toghrul said. “I kept busy, at any rate.” He glanced at Rhyden again. “Are you going to draw your scimitar?”

“I think this will do for the moment,” Rhyden said, hefting the staff between his hands.

They could see the Minghan now, their features and forms bathed in lamplight. Toghrul stooped, setting the lamp against the ground and then stood, looking among them. “Sain bainuu, bahadur Megetu,” he called out to the largest of them. Toghrul spun the hilt of his scimitar against his hand as he offered greeting, his brows furrowing, his knees flexing, his gutal shifting minutely against the dirt into a ready stance.

The huge Minghan nodded once. “Sain bainuu, bahadur Toghrul,” he said. His voice was high-pitched and fragile, like a small child’s, or a woman’s. It sounded gurgling, as if he had drowned and spoke to them now with a gullet full of water. Water dribbled out of his mouth, spilling down his chin, spattering between his toes.

“Friend of yours?” Rhyden asked Toghrul.

“Megetu Arslantei,” Toghrul said. “Bahadur of the Minghan -- their leader. Damn near cut my head off a time or two.”

“It has been some time,” Megetu said to Toghrul. The Minghan spread out all the more, five approaching Toghrul, five moving toward Rhyden.

“Yes, it has,” Toghrul said. “You are not an evil man, Megetu. There has always been honor about you -- my enemy or not. Let us pass. You know this is futile. The lair belongs to Temuchin, the dragons to the Oirat.”

“You might have tricked the Tengri with your buyu and lies,” Megetu said. “But you cannot trick me, bahadur -- or my Qatun’Eke. Targutai is the Negh. The dragons belong to the Khahl.” He turned to his Minghan. “Kill them both. The Qatun’Eke wants their heads and genitalia delivered to her by the time our Kagan reaches the lair.”

Five Minghan charged Rhyden at once. As the first rushed upon him, drawing his scimitar high above his head, Rhyden backpedaled, raising the staff between his hands. The sword swung down, and Rhyden’s knees buckled as the shaft bore the impact in full. He shoved his gutal up, planting his foot squarely in the man’s gut and punted mightily, sending the man sprawling backwards, crashing to the ground.

Two more came at him from either side. Rhyden drew the staff down and snapped his left hand out, sending the end of the spear smashing into one of the Minghan’s faces. As the man floundered back, Rhyden released his grip with his left hand, swinging the staff in a broad arc with his right, battering aside the Minghan’s proffered sword strike. He planted the right tip of the spear in the dirt and leaped, clasping the length of the shaft between his hands. He swung his legs out, driving his gutal heels simultaneously into both Minghan’s noses, cracking their heads back on their skulls and sending them tumbling.

Rhyden dropped gracefully to the ground, hefting the shaft in his right hand, spinning it, adjusting his grip against the wood. He recoiled, drawing the length of wood behind him, letting the end drape against his forearm, his fingers poised at the ready.

Two more Minghan approached as their three fellows groaned and struggled to rise. Rhyden swung the shaft out from behind him, sending the far end in a tight arc, hooking against the back of one of the Minghan’s heels. He jerked it forward and the man stumbled clumsily, knocked off balance. Rhyden shoved his right hand forward, sending the end of the staff smashing into the Minghan’s face, battering the wits from him and crumpling him.

The next was upon him and Rhyden whirled, grabbing the spear between his hands and jerking it up just in time to parry a downward scimitar strike. He felt the force of the blow strain against the old beam, shiver through his arms, and he pivoted his shoulders, throwing his weight to his right, forcing the sword away from him. He had caught the Minghan off-guard, and the man stumbled; Rhyden swung the right end of the staff around, plowing it into the side of his head hard enough to send a thick spray of blood flying from his nose. The Minghan crashed to the dirt, sprawling on his belly.

Bright pain seared through him as a scimitar blade cut into his hip from behind. He cried out and swung the shaft blindly, smashing into the attacking Minghan's head. The Minghan floundered, and Rhyden pivoted, hooking the end of his staff beneath the tang of the scimitar. He snapped his arm up, wrenching the sword loose from the Minghan's grasp, and tearing the blade out of his back. As the sword fell to the ground, Rhyden turned, pummeling the left end of the shaft into the Minghan's head, sending him crashing to the dirt.

He felt a sudden, swift wind tug against the fur lined collar of his del along the nape of his neck, and something hot and wet splashed against him as a shrill shriek ripped through the air. He turned, startled to find a Minghan behind him, close enough that he might have reached out and tapped Rhyden's shoulder. A bone-handled hilt -- Toghrul's dagger -- protruded from his forehead, thrown with lethal accuracy, punching just beneath the iron rim of his helm. The length of dagger beneath the hilt was buried nearly in full in the man's skull. The Minghan's scimitar wavered in the air above him, clutched between his hands, poised to cleave down into Rhyden's head. As the Minghan collapsed, his fingers went limp, and the sword clattered to the ground.

Rhyden whirled toward Toghrul and managed to meet the bahadur's gaze for a fleeting moment. Toghrul said nothing; he was too busy fighting, but he nodded once at Rhyden as if to say, *We are even now.*

"Hoah, muise," Rhyden said, turning as another Minghan charged at him. *Indeed.*

Toghrul spun away from Rhyden, tearing his gaze away from the Elf's as a Minghan came at him, his scimitar whistling in the air. Toghrul brought his blade up in a sharp, blocking the blow. He heaved to his right, shoving the Minghan's sword away

from him, throwing the man off balance. Toghrul caught his hilt in both hands and shoved it forward, planting his gutal between the Minghan's feet and ramming the end of the blade beneath the bottom edge of his hide breastplate, into his gut. Toghrul uttered a sharp cry, wrenching the blade, using the hooked tip to wrench the man's belly open. He danced back as the Minghan's entrails spilled from the wound.

"Can you make it past them?" Toghrul shouted to Rhyden as another Minghan drove his blade down at him. Toghrul pivoted, shifting the hilt to his right palm and swinging the sword around, battering the attack aside. He curled his left hand into a fist and let it sail, smashing his knuckles into the Minghan's face, feeling his nose crunch, shattering at the blow.

He glanced over his shoulder, finding Rhyden in the melee. "Can you make it past them?" he shouted again. When again, this elicited no response, he remembered the Elf's deafness. *Can you make it past them?* he thought, hoping that somehow Rhyden would sense him.

Apparently, he did. Rhyden caught two Minghan with the length of his staff, swinging it to clip one beneath the chin, the other against the nape of the neck. As he snapped his arms, both Minghan went flying; one backward, the other forward, sprawling to the ground. "I am not leaving you here!" he shouted, glancing over his shoulder at Toghrul.

Another Minghan attacked Toghrul, driving him back with a volley of brutal sword swings. When Toghrul tried to parry, dancing away from the man, the Minghan smashed his blade against Toghrul's, driving the tip into the dirt, pinning it there. Toghrul and the Minghan glared at one another, near enough to kiss one another if they had felt so inclined. Toghrul's brows furrowed and he reared his head back, thrusting forward, smashing his forehead against the Minghan's nose. The Minghan staggered, and Toghrul floundered as momentary stars danced before him. He shoved the heel of his hand against his brow and turned, warding off another attack.

Forget about me! he thought to Rhyden and as a Minghan rushed at him from his left, swinging his sword, he folded himself back, arching his back and dropping his shoulders toward the ground. He felt the rustling breeze as the blade swept above him; he shifted his grip on his hilt, brandishing it like a dagger as he righted himself, thrusting

the blade through the Minghan's ribcage, in the vulnerable spot where the front and back panels of heavily lined hide armor came together at his side. Toghrul twisted the blade, wrenching it, letting the curved end tear open the man's innards, and then he jerked it loose. *You are the only one left with hiimori! You have to get to Temu! You have to stop Mongoljin!*

He screamed as a scimitar caught him from behind, punching through his back. He screamed even more as the end of the blade thrust out of his belly, just above his left hip.

"Toghrul -- !" Rhyden cried.

Toghrul rammed his elbow back, feeling it slam into the face of the Minghan who had impaled him. He reached over his head as the man floundered against him and hooked his hands against the collar and shoulder of the Minghan's chest armor. Toghrul folded at the knees, throwing the man over his shoulder, sending him crashing to the ground. He staggered, gasping for breath, staring in stricken aghast at the blood-smeared blade protruding from his gut. "Tengerii boshig...!" he whimpered.

"Does it hurt?" he heard a delicate voice ask, and he raised his head, his brows furrowing. Megetu stood before him, smiling. "Does it, bahadur?" he asked, and then he lunged forward, clasping his hilt between his hands, meaning to drive his blade into the nape of Toghrul's neck.

Toghrul took his own hilt between his fists and swung, unfurling his legs beneath him. He bashed Megetu's strike aside, sending the enormous man stumbling sideways, his eyes flown wide in surprise. The movement wrenched at the blade skewered through Toghrul's midriff, and he staggered, his knees buckling as he screamed.

"Does it?" Megetu hissed again, glaring at him, recovering his balance. He drove his scimitar in a sharp arc, not aiming for Toghrul, but for the hilt protruding from his back. Megetu struck it hard, forcing it up, wrenching another agonized shriek from Toghrul. Toghrul's legs failed him and he collapsed to his knees.

"The pain will be over soon," Megetu promised, drawing his blade back again, aiming for the base of Toghrul's skull. Toghrul closed his eyes, hunching his shoulders, bracing himself for the kiss of steel. He heard a snapping of wind, and Megetu uttered a sharp, startled yelp. Toghrul opened his eyes, stunned to find Megetu swaying

unsteadily on his feet, his scimitar dropping from his fingertips, the thick length of an arrow protruding from his head.

Megetu looked down at Toghrul, his eyes wide with shocked disbelief. "She...she made me..." he said, and then he fell over backwards, crashing to the ground, dead.

Toghrul looked over his left shoulder and his eyes flew wide. "Juchin!"

"Drive them back!" Juchin roared, rushing headlong out of the dark tunnel behind them and into the fray. He was bloodied and limping badly, but somehow -- impossibly - still alive. At least twenty Uru'ut Kelet came behind him, charging the Minghan, scimitars and bows clasped in hand.

"Drive them back!" Juchin bellowed again, and then the Kelet plowed into the Minghan with a resounding, clattering din of steel against steel and overlapping, furious battle cries.

Someone stumbled into Toghrul, jostling the scimitar through his gut, and he crumpled forward, pressing his head against the dirt as he swooned. Another pair of legs floundered into him as the Minghan and Kelet staggered about, fully engaged, and again, Toghrul convulsed, feeling blood rise in his throat, spewing from his mouth as he shrieked.

Strong hands hooked beneath his arms, tugging against him, hauling him to his feet. His knees folded almost as soon as he was upright once more. He felt someone catch his hand, draping his arm across broad shoulders, leading him in staggering, clumsy tow away from the fighting. He fainted, only to come to a few moments later as he was settled against the ground, his shoulders propped against the tunnel wall. As the hilt of the scimitar dragged against the dirt, he woke himself screaming, twisting helplessly.

"Tere ayu sayin," he heard a gentle voice say, and his eyes fluttered open. *It is alright.* His vision was blurred, his mind dazed, the light poor and feeble at best. He blinked in confusion, gasping for breath.

"Juchin?" he whispered. He felt a gentle hand press against his cheek, cradling his face.

"Yes, ko'un," Juchin said, calling him *son*. "It is me."

Toghrul stared at him in disbelief. "But you...you are dead," he said. "...I heard you scream...the semamitan...I saw it..."

"I am not quite dead, I promise you, though the semamitan tried their best." Juchin glanced down at his chest, and Toghrul could see the front of his del had been torn wide by the bat's teeth and claws. Juchin's chest lay swathed with strips of blanket, makeshift and bloodstained bandages beneath the ripped hide.

"Where did the other Kelet come from?" Toghrul asked, bewildered.

"The threshold," Juchin said. The long scar along his cheek crimped as he smiled. "Aigiarn's plan worked. Our archers pinned the Minghan down as they tried to pass from the tunnel through the entrance. They have all fallen -- though not without struggle. Enough of ours survived to venture into the city, to follow us into the tunnels." He nodded to indicate the fighting. "They came upon us just when it seemed we would know no hope against the semamitan. The Tengri blessed us -- though many good Kelet died to drive the creatures back into the shadows."

Toghrul blinked at him. "You...you saved my life, Juchin."

Juchin smiled gently. "Your loss would move me, Toghrul," he said. "And I am not ready to mourn for you just yet."

"Toghrul!" Rhyden cried, rushing toward them. He was bleeding from injuries of his own, staggering, and he fell to his knees in front of Toghrul, his eyes flown wide. He spared Juchin a startled, somewhat incredulous glance, and then he looked at Toghrul again, aghast.

"Forget me," Toghrul said, catching Rhyden by the hand. "You must go on with Juchin...the others...find Temu."

"I am not leaving you," Rhyden said.

"You are the only one left with hiimori among us," Toghrul said. "You...you have to go. You are the only one who can keep him safe from Mongoljin. You are the only one who...who can lead us to the lair."

"I cannot sense Temu anymore," Rhyden whispered. "Toghrul, he is lost to me. Mongoljin is keeping him from me. I cannot..."

“Then you must hurry,” Toghrul said. He stared at Rhyden, his eyes filled with pain and desperate implore as he clutched at the Elf’s hand. “Please. It...it cannot be for nothing. He is my boy -- as he is yours. Help him.”

“I will go with you, Rhyden,” Juchin said. “We can go together right now. The others will tend to Toghrul. They -- ”

“There is not enough time,” Rhyden said. He reached for his bogcu, raising his hips. “I can sense Mongoljin all around us. She is so strong, I cannot feel Temu anymore. He and Aigiarn were moving that way along the tunnel to get away from her...” He pointed. “The armory is down there somewhere -- the entrance to the lair tunnels. They might have reached it. They might have found it.”

“Then there is hope,” Juchin said. “If Temuchin has found the lair tunnel, then he is on his way to his destiny. We can still follow. We can still stop -- ”

“There is not a man among us who can run fast enough to reach them,” Rhyden said. “Not before Mongoljin and Targutai.”

“We...we cannot give up,” Toghrul said. “Please, Rhyden, we...we cannot...”

“We will not,” Rhyden said, meeting his gaze. He pulled something out of his bogcu: a small, flat bundle cradled against his palm. Toghrul glanced at it, and looked at Rhyden, his expression curious. “We cannot reach Temu physically -- but you are right,” Rhyden said. “I have hiimori. I can reach him through the jabsar.”

He unfolded the bundle, revealing a pair of small, dried berries tucked inside. “Qola’nolan,” Rhyden said. “They were Yeb’s. He used them to induce qaraq journeys -- to enter the jabsar. I can go there. I can get to Temu faster than you could bat an eye.”

“Anything is possible in the jabsar,” Toghrul said. “It is a place for shamans. There are no rules, Rhyden. Do you know how to travel through it?”

“No,” Rhyden admitted. He tried to smile. “But if anything is possible, how bloody hard could it be?”

He pinched the berries between his fingers, drawing them toward his mouth. Juchin caught his wrist, staying him. “Mongoljin can travel to the jabsar, too,” Juchin said. “She will fight you there. If she defeats you, your ami will be banished to the qarang’qui -- the eternal darkness.”

“If she follows me to the jabsar, then she cannot follow Temu to the lair,” Rhyden said. He opened his mouth and canted his head back, popping the berries against his tongue. “Let her come,” he said, looking at Juchin and Toghrul. “Let her try. I defeated her once in the jabsar. This time, I will destroy her.”

Chapter Eleven

Aigiarn met Targutai's gaze as he stepped across the threshold of the armory, brandishing the anam'cladh ablaze in his fist. A woman stepped through the doorway behind him. Aigiarn had never seen her face before, but there was no mistaking the resemblance between mother and child -- or the Qatun'Eke's legendary beauty. There was also no mistaking the glittering black orbs that served as the young woman's eyes, and Aigiarn shied back an uncertain step, her breath tangling in surprise.

Yisun Goyaljin, she thought. Tengerii boshig, Mongoljin wears the form of Targutai's mother!

Targutai's eyes swept across the room as the sword's blue glow spilled about the confines of the chamber, and then locked with hers, his brows furrowing. "Where is Temuchin Arightei?" he demanded.

"Someplace you cannot follow," Aigiarn said.

"He is hiding from us," Mongoljin said. "The false one has summoned his power to disguise his whereabouts." She turned to Aigiarn. "But she knows where the doorway is that leads to the lair tunnel. She knows how to open it."

Targutai glowered at Aigiarn. "Tell me, bitch," he said, striding toward her. Aigiarn did not flinch at his advance. She stood her ground, meeting his gaze, her scimitar tip unwavering. He smacked headlong into Temu's jaqa line and recoiled, stumbling backward. His arms pinwheeled in the air and then he fell, landing hard on his rump. He blinked up at Mongoljin, the cleft between his brows deepening. "What is this?" he shouted.

Mongoljin walked past him. She paused when she came to the line of ashes Temu had drawn in the ground. She looked down at her feet and then raised her face slowly, her eyebrow arched, the corner of her mouth lifted wryly. "Clever," she murmured, offering Aigiarn a single, conciliatory nod. "It is a jaqa line, my Kagan," she said to Targutai. "A binding spell meant to keep buyu and spirits from passing through a place. Their shaman tried a similar pathetic attempt when first we met. I crossed it easily. We shall cross this one, as well."

She waved her hand over the line of ashes, but nothing happened. Mongoljin blinked, her mouth twisting in a frown, and waved her hand again. The line of ashes remained unbroken. "That is odd," she remarked.

"He is stronger than you," Aigiarn said, drawing her gaze. "Temuchin is stronger than you, Mongoljin. He can keep you from him."

"He is a bastard whelp pup," Targutai snapped. "His power is mine. You stole it from me." He strode toward Aigiarn again, his brows furrowed. She realized his eyes were glowing with pale blue light, just like Temu's, and she drew back.

"You stole my power," Targutai seethed, spinning the anam'cladh in his hand. "You stole my gerel -- but now I have found another. The powers that were meant for me are mine. You stole them, but I have reclaimed them. You took my birthmarks and now you will try to steal my dragons? Do you think I will let you, you stupid Oirat bitch?"

He thrust the blade of the anam'cladh forward, and as it passed through the air above the line of ashes, its blue glow spread around it, seeping into the air. It splayed outward in a luminous corona, framing Targutai's body as he stepped across the jaqa line, collapsing in upon itself once he had passed, disappearing again.

Aigiarn shied back, her eyes wide with startled shock. "Where is the door?" Targutai asked. He glanced toward the piles of weapons and armor littering the floor and at his gaze, the abandoned metal plates shivered and rattled, ancient swords rising from the ground, floating in the air.

Aigiarn counted seven swords hovering around her, flanking her from all sides and she leveled her blade at Targutai. "Go bugger yourself."

Targutai glared, and all seven swords pivoted in the air, the tips of their blades swinging at her. "Bitch," he hissed, shoving his hand toward Aigiarn. The swords flew at her, darting from all sides.

"Tengerii boshig -- !" Aigiarn cried as one hissed through the air, aiming for her face. She pivoted, drawing her shield up, and winced, her gutal skittering in the dirt as the sword slammed forcefully into the steel plate. She backpedaled, swinging her scimitar around in a sharp arc, deflecting another sword, sending it clattering against the wall. Two more flew at her, and she yelped, battering one away with her shield, and parrying the proffered thrust of the other with her sword.

Aigiarn whirled, swinging her shield up to counter a blade as it flew at her throat. She pivoted, dancing backward, driving her sword in a broad swing in front of her, batting aside another. She ducked as yet another sailed over her head, impaling itself in the wall halfway to the hilt. She jerked her shield toward her face to block another swinging for her neck and heard the screeching scrape of steel against steel as the edge of the sword met the buckler. The last sword punched into her chest, just below her breast, and Aigiarn screamed, sprawling to the ground.

“Aigiarn! No!” cried a voice from the doorway. Startled, Targutai whirled, his hand poised in midair.

Aigiarn lifted her head, her eyes widening in stunned disbelief. “Rhyden!”

Rhyden rushed across the threshold toward her, his brows narrowed, his jaw set at a grave, imposing angle. He plowed into the jaqa barrier and recoiled, his eyes flying wide in start as he stumbled back. He staggered, regaining his footing, and he blinked at Aigiarn. “What the...?” he whispered, bewildered and stricken.

Targutai blinked at Rhyden and then began to laugh. “You must be the golden falcon,” he said. “Surprise -- Temuchin Arightei thought he could keep us from him with a jaqa line.” He snorted. “Too bad it will only keep you from saving his mother’s life.”

Rhyden looked at Aigiarn helplessly, and then turned to Targutai, his brows narrowing. “Do not touch her,” he said. “You little rot bastard -- do not touch her!”

“Or what?” Targutai asked, smirking. “You will use your Elf buyu on me?”

Mongoljin thrust her hand at Rhyden, sending him flying off his feet and crashing against the far wall. He cried out sharply, breathlessly as the wits and wind were battered from him, and he crumpled to the ground.

“Rhyden!” Aigiarn cried. “No!”

“Leave...leave her alone...” Rhyden said, shoving his hands beneath him and lifting his head. He drew his legs beneath him and stumbled to his feet, his brows still furrowed, his hands still clenched. He walked toward Targutai. “Fight me, you bastard. I am right here.”

Mongoljin waved her hand in the air again, and a pair of swords rose from a pile of discarded weapons. The swords darted for Rhyden’s head and Aigiarn screamed, holding her hand out as if she meant to stay the blades. “Rhyden, look out!”

Rhyden's hands darted reflexively for his face, his shoulder hunkering. The swords sailed right through him, as if he was made of smoke; they smashed against the wall behind him and clattered to the ground.

Targutai blinked at him, stunned. Aigiarn whimpered breathlessly, relieved and confused. "Rhyden...?" she gasped.

Rhyden lowered his hands, the corner of his mouth hooking as he met Mongoljin's gaze. "Surprise," he said, and then the swords darted from behind him, flying past his shoulders, sailing straight at Mongoljin.

She had no time to react; the long blades punched into Yisun's form, sinking into her shoulder and belly, plowing her off of her feet. She crashed backward to the ground, her feet sprawling skyward.

"No!" Targutai screamed, rushing toward the jaqa line. "No, stop it! That is my mother's form! No!" He stared at Rhyden, stricken and enraged. "How did you do that?" he shrieked. "You bloody rot bastard -- how did you do that?"

"Elf buyu," Rhyden told him, dropping him a wink.

"He...he is not really here," Mongoljin hissed, sitting up, her hair disheveled and hanging in her face. She grasped the hilt of the sword buried in her gut and wrenched it loose, casting it aside. Blood seeped in a broadening stain against the front of her ivory changyl, and Targutai moaned.

"What?" he asked. "What do you mean? He is standing right in front of me! He...!"

"It is an illusion his mind -- his hiimori -- has conjured," Mongoljin said, closing her fist against the sword in her shoulder. She grunted, jerking it free, and tossed it away from her. "He is here by qaraq. His ami has left his form -- this is his spirit. He is in the jabsar."

She struggled to rise, limping to her feet. She stared at Rhyden, her black eyes glittering, her brows furrowed. "A clever move, but foolish," she said. "He is vulnerable in the jabsar -- weak and unskilled. His hiimori is different than any other shaman's or spirit, unfamiliar even to him. He cannot wield it well. He faced me once on the jabsar plane, and he bled for it."

Targutai whirled to Rhyden, drawing the anam'cladh back in his hand, meaning to ram the blazing sword through the jaqa. "Then let him bleed there again," he hissed.

"Targutai -- no," Mongoljin said, holding out her hand, staying him. "You deal with the woman. Find the entrance to the tunnel. I will be back."

"Where are you going?" Targutai asked, frowning.

Mongoljin smiled at Rhyden, her black eyes glittering. "To the jabsar."

"Rhyden, no...!" Aigiarn whimpered, terrified for him. Mongoljin had not only overpowered Yeb's hiimori, she had destroyed Trejaeran, the most powerful spirit among them. *You cannot face her alone!* she screamed in her mind. *Rhyden, no, please! She will kill you!*

He looked at her, his expression softening. *I love you, Aigiarn. Trust me. I know what I am doing.* He turned to Mongoljin, his brows narrowing again as he smiled without humor at her. "Come on then, bitch," he said. "I am waiting for you."

"Where is the door?" Targutai cried at Aigiarn, and the blade in her chest began to twist slowly. Aigiarn writhed, throwing back her head, gritting her teeth against a shriek. Yisun Goyaljin's body had collapsed to the ground in a lifeless heap only moments before, as Mongoljin's spirit abandoned it for the jabsar. Rhyden had disappeared as well, his form dissipating into the air.

"You...you will rot first...Targutai...!" Aigiarn cried. She grasped the hilt of the sword in her fist and wrenched it from her, sitting up and letting it fly, throwing it at Targutai's head. She moved so quickly, she caught him by surprise, and he ducked sideways, yelping in fright as the blade whistled just past his ear, striking the wall behind him. He brought his fingertips to his neck, fluttering against his earlobe and they came away spotted with blood.

"You bitch," he hissed. "That cut me." He thrust his hand out at Aigiarn, and she flew off of the ground. She slammed into the far wall of the chamber, and hung there, suspended more than five feet from the floor. As she struck the granite, her scimitar was jarred from her hand, a strangled cry wrenched from her mouth. She struggled to move, but was pinned in place, helpless and immobilized. Targutai's brows furrowed, and

Aigiarn gasped as the straps of her shield snapped free, and the metal disk flew from her arm, sailing across the room.

“No one cuts me,” Targutai said, and Aigiarn flew forward in the air. She cried out as he threw her back again, slamming her roughly into the stone. She fell to the ground, landing hard on her belly, and cried out in pain. He closed his fist in her hair, crouching behind her, planting his knee against the small of her back. He jerked her head back and Aigiarn felt his hot, moist breath against her ear. “I am the Kagan -- the sacred son of the seven. How dare you cut me?”

“You are a coward,” Aigiarn gasped at Targutai. “A coward, Targutai Bokedei, that you would not even face me without your hiimori to hide behind. Of all of the things I have heard about you, that has never been among them -- that you were too great a coward to fight fairly.”

“I do not fight women,” Targutai hissed. “I take my turn with them and then I leave them to rot.”

Aigiarn craned her head against the pull of his fist, meeting his gaze. “Then you are a coward,” she said. “I have heard that you lead your Minghan into battle -- that you lead Oirat raids yourself, unafraid. How my people have cowered -- all of these years, how I have cowered at the thought of you coming upon us in the night, your scimitar in hand, or your bow. I might have known they were nothing but lies -- stories invented to protect a simpering child.”

“I am not a child,” Targutai said, twisting his fist in her hair.

“Yes, you are. If you were a man, you would fight me -- blade to blade. No hiimori. A man does not need buyu when he has a nimble sword hand to speak for him - - not a real man, Targutai.”

Targutai roared, a furious, indiscernible garble of sounds. He thrust Aigiarn's head away from him and she grimaced as her forehead bashed against the dirt. Targutai scrambled to his feet, backpedaling from her. He swung the anam'cladh at her, brandishing its fiery blade in his fist. “Get up!” he shouted. “Get up, then, bitch! You want to fight me? Come on -- I am here! I do not need buyu! I will show you a nimble sword hand, you rot damn Oirat!”

Aigiarn drew her feet beneath her, stumbling as she stood. Targutai charged at her, swinging the anam'cladh in a broad arc. Aigiarn staggered back, jerking her scimitar before her, parrying his blow. They tussled together, their blades crossed, and Aigiarn shoved him away, sending him floundering. She gasped as pain seared through her ribs at the movement and she limped away from him, twirling her sword, keeping her eyes fixed on him.

"I will run you through, bitch," Targutai said. He lunged at her, shoving his blade at her belly. Aigiarn danced back, hooking the flat of her blade beneath his and swinging up sharply, knocking his attack aside.

"Not with those clumsy sword strikes, you will not," she said. His face twisted with fury and he charged her again, his gutal pounding against the ground, the anam'cladh thrust before him. Aigiarn parried his blow, letting him rush past her. She pivoted, following his movement, swinging her sword, the edge of her blade whistling for his throat. Targutai brought the flaming sword around in a sharp arc, blocking the blow, crossing their blades again. His proficiency with a blade was obvious, if not surprising, but he was still a boy, smaller than her. He grunted, his teeth gritted as he tried to shove against her. Aigiarn's brows furrowed and she kicked her foot out, hooking her gutal behind his ankle. She punted his foot out from beneath him and he yelped, stumbling, crashing onto his rump.

"Bitch," he hissed, scrambling to his feet, rushing at her. He shoved the tip of the anam'cladh at her heart; Aigiarn pivoted her hips, swinging her sword around, batting aside the attack. She snapped her wrist, letting the edge of her blade fly upward, settling it sharply, firmly beneath the shelf of his chin. He jerked his head away from her as he scuttled back, swinging his sword, driving her away from him. "You are weak," he told her, and he lunged on the offensive again.

Aigiarn danced back her gutal moving lightly, easily across the ground as she parried his attacks, keeping her eyes on his blade. She stepped to her right. He did not anticipate the move as he thrust the anam'cladh forward and he stumbled. Aigiarn hooked her boot against his foot again, tripping him, and he stumbled against the wall. "And you are clumsy," she said.

He rushed at her again; their swords sang in disharmonic clamor as they smashed together. He shoved against her, trying to throw her off balance. Aigiarn caught the tip of the anam'cladh against her own, the scimitar's curved end hooking against the fiery blade. She wrenched her hilt toward her right shoulder, twisting the anam'cladh away from Targutai's grasp, craning his wrists at sudden, painful angles. He yowled, loosening his grip reflexively. She swung her arms to the left and the sword flew out of his hands, sailing across the room. As it parted from his fingers, the fiery blue blade extinguished, plunging them into darkness.

Targutai staggered back from her, startled by the sudden, absolute dark. Aigiarn listened to his scuffling footsteps, her eyes round and alert, darting about the chamber. She heard a soft sound: Targutai fumbling in his bogcu pouch. After a moment came the distinctive scraping of flints and Aigiarn froze, following the sound with her gaze. She saw a dazzle of sparks, and then nothing but darkness. The scraping came again as Targutai struck flints together, and then a lick of flame appeared, a faint, golden glow. He had jerked his sash loose from beneath the hide armor panel of his breastplate, setting the end of the wool afire. It was feeble light, and he cradled the flame with his hands, crouched on the ground. He looked up at her and their eyes locked. Aigiarn kept her sword pointed at him.

"You will not kill me," he said, the growing, fluttering light of the fire dancing across his face. He looked down at the scarf and then looked across the room toward some listing, broken, dry-rotted wood shelves. The scarf rose from the ground, the flames growing brighter, stronger. He nodded at the shelves, and the scarf fluttered across the room, the tail of it flapping against the ground. Aigiarn sidestepped around it, turning to watch it land against the dilapidated wood beams. After a moment, the flames brushed tentatively from the wool against the wood, and within a few more moments, the first shelf was alight, the fire's glow spreading slowly to fill the room.

While she was distracted by the flames, Targutai moved to dart for the fallen anam'cladh hilt. Aigiarn whirled, stepping with him, leveling her blade at him. He stared at her, ashen, trembling, his dark eyes enormous with alarm. "You...you will not kill me," he said again.

He cut to his left, stepping broadly, swiftly, and she stepped with him again, drawing the scimitar up in her hand, shoving the hooked end of the blade for his nose. "I would not be so sure of that," Aigiarn said.

His brows furrowed. "I would." She heard the hiss of wind behind her and moved, diving instinctively to her right. He had used his hiimori to lift an Abhacan sword from a pile of ancient, discarded weapons and hurl it at her, the blade meant for the back of her neck. She felt the edge of sharpened steel nick against the hip of her del as it sailed past her, and she hit the ground hard, twisting in agony as her broken ribs grinded together.

The sword flew against Targutai's palm and he closed his fingers about it. "Women are not warriors," Targutai said, and he walked toward her, spinning the blade. "Your hearts are too soft, your spirits too frail. A man would not have hesitated. A man would have cut my throat when he had the chance -- darkness or not."

Aigiarn tried to sit up, shoving her arm beneath her. The movement sent another wrenching pain through her chest, and she cried out again, crumpling, her scimitar falling from her hand. She reached for it, fumbling, and Targutai stomped his gutal heel against her hand. She cried out, recoiling, and he punted the sword away from her.

"There is no honor in fighting a woman, killing her in battle, even if she knows how to fight," Targutai told her, and he snapped his wrist, laying the edge of his blade against her throat, catching her beneath her jaw. "But there is still pleasure in it, Oirat bitch," he said. "And I am going to enjoy this."

Do you really think you can defeat me? Mongoljin asked Rhyden. They stood alone in the dark plane of the jabsar, neither of them summoning a backdrop in which to visit. Without their memories or thoughts to transform the landscape, the jabsar stretched around them, a place of utter, infinite darkness. Rhyden glowed here, the golden light of his gerel enfolding his body. Mongoljin's black gerel seemed to repel even this bright illumination, leaving her flesh stark and pale, nearly luminous.

You are a fool to challenge me here in the jabsar, where I am in my most primal element, she purred. Do you truly believe you have any hope against me, Rhyden Fabchun?

“It is the jabsar,” he told her, drawing his scimitar from his hip, spinning the hilt against his hand. “Anything is possible here.”

The scimitar vanished from his hand, the curved blade flashing with golden light from his gerel and then disappearing. She staggered, uttering a sharp, startled cry, arching her back as the blade suddenly appeared, shoved nearly to the hilt between her shoulder blades.

I can move things with my mind here, Rhyden said. I did not understand before, but I do now, Mongoljin -- I can make anything happen just by thinking it. Time has no limitations here. I can make things happen in the present...the future...

“I can even be in two places at once,” Rhyden said from behind her, tapping her on the shoulder. She whirled about and he punched her, sending his fist flying into her mouth. Her head snapped back on her neck and she floundered, stumbling and collapsing to her knees. “Or at least, move so fast that is how it seems. I can attack you and you will not even sense coming, Mongoljin -- much less see.”

Clever boy, Mongoljin hissed. She reached behind her head, her fingers elongating, flowing like molten honey, dribbling against the scimitar protruding from her back. The viscous tendrils curled about the shaft of the blade. The sword dissipated like smoke at her touch, waning into a silver mist that faded in the air. Yet you still fight like you are limited by the mortal plane. You have learned something of this place -- but not enough.

She snapped her arm forward, the ichor-like tendrils of her forearm and fingers darting across the clearing. Rhyden recoiled, feeling them slap against his face, closing against him, clamping against his cheeks, forehead and chin. He struggled against her; as he hooked his hands against the shaft of her wrist, he felt his fingers sink into the tacky surface of her flesh, slipping for purchase.

You faced me here once -- full of surprises, and I was yet weak, Mongoljin said in his mind, letting her arm retract, collapsing upon itself toward her shoulder, drawing her near to him. But now I know all of your secrets. Do you not remember our kiss? I tasted you, drew your heart and spirit from the бага'han, just as he drew them from you. I know your secrets and I am strong now. I will defeat you, Rhyden Fabhcun, and I will destroy you -- but first, I will devour your sweet, magnificent hiimori. I will savor every

exquisite moment of it. You do not know how to command it, but it will not be a gift wasted within me. Perhaps you will find some solace in that.

Rhyden narrowed his brows. "Bugger yourself, bitch," he said, and her hand and arm turned to ice as he settled his gaze upon her. There was a sharp, hissing sound as the air collapsed, freezing about her distended limb, and then Rhyden shook his head mightily, shattering it like glass in a spray of thousands of miniscule shards. He seized her with his mind, shoving her away from him, hurling her backwards through the jabsar.

She came to an abrupt halt, floating, and the corner of her mouth hooked in a smile.

Pathetic, she said. You can damage my form? This body is an illusion. Do you think you can hurt me? There is no pain here...at least, not for me.

Mongoljin's smile widened. *But you...* She raised her brow at him. *You feel pain here, do you not? Your hiimori is different somehow. You bleed in the jabsar...and your body bleeds beyond it.*

She thrust her hands at him, her arms stretching impossibly long again, rushing at him. He moved, but she was too quick. Her hands had melted somehow; the flesh of her fingers running like tallow, melding together into thick, pointed spears, as solid and lethal as forged steel. Her left hand punched through his shoulder, sinking deep beneath the socket, and he screamed, staggering sideways, his knees failing him. He felt her hand thrust out through his back, between his scapula and spine, and he shrieked anew as her fingers splayed, her arm grasping through his chest.

The blade of her right hand froze before his face, poised to strike, the sharp tip where her fingers had once met prodding against his cheek. He staggered, mewling for breath, feeling her twist her arm within him, wrenching a hoarse, strangled cry from him. He flinched as her hand brushed against his face, and when she began to pull him toward her, he staggered in tow, gasping and stumbling.

You think you understand the jabsar? she asked. *You understand nothing. You have no concept of this place.*

You are wrong, he said. He looked up to meet her gaze, his brows furrowed, his teeth clenched. He threw her away from him, using his mind to drive her back, to force her hand from his torso, to send her flying.

"I understand the jabsar perfectly," he seethed, stumbling, pressing his hand against his wounded shoulder, feeling blood course from the gaping wound. "It...it is you, Mongoljin...who...who have no concept."

She flew at him, her hands outstretched, her black eyes gleaming beneath drawn, furrowed brows. Her fingers began to lengthen, whipping in the air like tendrils of spider webbing, grasping for him. He shoved his hand at her, and she flew back again, flipping heels over pate in the darkness. He could hear her laughing in his mind, and then he reeled from the pain, his knees buckling. He leaned over, pressing his hand against his shoulder, gasping for breath.

Still you fight as though there was earth beneath us, the sky above. Mongoljin dropped daintily beside him, reaching down, curling her fingers in his hair. He cried out as she tightened her hand into a fist and craned his head back, forcing him to look up at her. *You know nothing of your powers. Do your best to stop me -- defend yourself, Elf. I have nothing but time to take with you -- all of the time in the Bith to make you bleed.*

"You...you are right, Mongoljin," he whispered. "Here in the jabsar...there is nothing but time."

His hand shot out, clamping against her chin, startling a sharp cry from her. He turned as her fingers loosened in his hair and stood, straightening in full to face her. He lowered his hand from his shoulder and she blinked at him, recoiling in visible shock to see the wound in his shoulder was gone. His torn, bloodstained del remained, a broad swath ripped in the thick hide where her hand had run him through, but she could see the flesh of his chest beneath -- unmarred and uninjured.

"Elves heal," Rhyden said, tightening his grip on her face, leaning toward her. "Give us time, Mongoljin, and we heal from nearly any wound. In the jabsar, one moment...one thousand years. What is the difference?" His brows narrowed at her. "Yes, I bleed here. But I heal here, as well. Bat your eyes -- I am whole again. You cannot hurt me, you bitch. "

He threw her away from him again, using his mind to send her careening back. He closed his eyes and the dark landscape dissolved around them, yielding to the armory beneath Ondur Dobu. Mongoljin flew across the chamber as it materialized

around her; when her body struck the barrier of Temu's jaqa line, she was catapulted forward, sent crashing face first against the ground.

Time immediately resumed its normal course; Targutai thrust his hand toward Aigiarn, and she writhed against the ground, screaming as the sword in her side twisted.

"Where is the door?" he shouted.

"You...you will rot first...Targutai...!" Aigiarn cried, clasping the sword hilt and wrenching it loose from her torso. She threw it at Targutai, and the boy ducked, yelping as it sailed past his head.

"You bitch," he said, touching his ear, feeling blood. "That cut me."

"It is all as we left it," Rhyden said to Mongoljin, as she levitated herself, rising into the air, her face twisted with outrage. "And it has all started again, as if we have never been gone. The jabsar is the between -- time does not pass there, but it waits for us here in the mortal plane. What we do in the jabsar affects that, and what is here in the mortal plane affects us. That is the *Tegsh*, Mongoljin -- the eternal balance -- and it is the limitation of the jabsar."

He willed himself across the room; his spirit dissipated, reappearing almost simultaneously beside Yisun's fallen body. He genuflected, grabbing a fistful of Yisun's dark hair, jerking her head back on her neck. He reached out with his free hand, and one of the Abhacan swords he had hurled at Mongoljin skittered across the floor, lifting into the air and slapping against his palm. He curled his fist around the hilt and shoved the blade against Yisun's throat.

"No!" Mongoljin cried, whirling to face him.

"If I cut her here, when we leave the jabsar, she will bleed," he said. "If I cut her, you will have no body to return to. You might survive for a time. You have stolen enough hiimori to make you strong. But you know you need a suni to remain here -- a body so you can keep with Targutai. Only a suni -- a physical form -- gives our amis a place to rest and restore. Without them, our power wanes -- even yours."

He raised his brow. "That is how the Ulusians were able to trap you, hold you within Tengriss Lake, is it not? You had no body and were too weak to leave on your own. You needed the hiimori of shamans to summon you from the water. You needed a physical form to bind you here, keep you strong."

You would not kill her, Mongoljin said. She is innocent in this, and it is not within your heart's capacity. I have tasted of your measure, Rhyden Fabhcun. I know you will not do it.

"Yisun Goyaljin is already dead," Rhyden said. "You abandoned her ami to the qarang'qui earlier tonight. This is only her form."

Mongoljin blinked at him, startled and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly. *My mind is closed to you, he said. But yours is not to me, Mongoljin.*

"Get up!" Targutai screamed at Aigiarn from behind them. "Get up, then, bitch! You want to fight me? Come on! I am here! I do not need buyu -- I will show you a nimble sword hand, you rot damn Oirat!"

He rushed at Aigiarn, swinging the anam'cladh. Aigiarn drew her scimitar up to meet them, the blades singing as they crashed together. The pair began to fight, shoving against one another, swinging their swords wildly.

I will take your bitch, Mongoljin said, looking at Aigiarn. I will take her form. I will force her ami to the qarang'qui and I will --

"Jaqa line," Rhyden said, making her whirl in startled, bewildered surprise. "Aigiarn is beyond the jaqa. You cannot cross it to reach her."

Mongoljin blinked again in bright new fury. *These tunnels are filled with men, she hissed, whipping about in the air, spinning toward the armory door. Strong physical forms to suit my needs, any of whom I can claim!*

Aigiarn swung her sword, hooking the curved end of the scimitar against the shaft of the anam'cladh blade. She wrenched it loose of Targutai's grasp; as the hilt flew from his hands, the bright blade abruptly extinguished, plunging the chamber into darkness.

"None of the men in these tunnels will make it here in time," Rhyden said to Mongoljin, his gerel aglow with golden light. "Not in time to protect Targutai or prevent Temu from reaching the lair."

Mongoljin's lips wrinkling back from her teeth as she snarled like some sort of feral cat. *Bastard!* she cried. *Dobun's heir will never claim them! They belong to my Targutai -- my Duua's child -- and he shall have them!*

Rhyden heard the scraping of flints and dim light began to spread through the chamber. Targutai had loosened his sash from around his waist, setting the corner on fire for illumination. "You...you will not kill me," he said to Aigiarn, moving the scarf with his mind, sending it skittering across the floor toward the toppled remnants of a weaponry rack. The flames met the ancient wood and ignited.

"They do not belong to Targutai," Rhyden told Mongoljin. "They never have and you know it. You have always known it. Your lies to your people began from the moment you poisoned Ag'iamon -- from the moment you dressed Duua in Dobun's clothes and brought him before your dying husband, deceiving him."

Lies! Mongoljin screeched, her hands closing into furious fists. Your tongue wags with nothing but lies! You know nothing!

Rhyden's brows furrowed. "I know you murdered Ag'iamon, the dragon lord. I know it is because of your treachery that the dragons abandoned Ulus, the balance of the Tegsh undone. I know you lied to your people -- for five thousand years, the Khahl have believed your lies. They genuinely believe Duua is the rightful son, that Targutai is the rightful Negh."

He is the rightful Negh! Mongoljin screamed. The dragons belong to him! They should belong to him -- it should all belong to him by right!

"I know that you were punished for your deceit, your sins," Rhyden said. "You were banished to Tengriss for your offense against the Tengri, because you betrayed the dragons, and all of your people. You betrayed them for greed."

I did it for love! Mongoljin cried.

Targutai had summoned an Abhacan sword to his hand, and he walked toward Aigiarn, swinging it in his hand. "Women are not warriors," he said. "Your hearts are too soft, your spirits too frail. A man would not have hesitated. A man would have cut my throat when he had the chance, darkness or not."

I did it for my son! For the love of my son! Mongoljin screeched. You know nothing of the truth -- nothing of love! A mother's love for her son knows no limits, no boundaries!

Aigiarn lay crumpled against the ground, grimacing in pain, reaching for her fallen sword. She cried out when Targutai smashed his boot heel against her knuckles, and

he kicked her scimitar across the room. "There is no honor in fighting a woman, killing her in battle, even if she knows how to fight," he said, leveling his sword at her, laying the blade against her throat. "But there is still pleasure in it, Oirat bitch -- and I am going to enjoy this."

I did what I had to do to see Duua know what was his by right! Mongoljin cried. My Duua deserved to be Kagan. He deserved the empire! He deserved the dragons -- as does his heir -- and I did what I had to! I would do anything, know any sacrifice, endure any suffering to see it his! What do you know of such unyielding love? Do you think what you feel for your Oirat bitch and Dobun's whelp even compares to my love for my son or for Targutai?

Rhyden glanced out of the corner of his eye at Aigiarn. She kicked her leg around, driving her foot into the back of Targutai's knees, sending him sprawling. He fell to the ground, and Aigiarn swung her hips around, drawing her gutal toward the Kagan. He began to sit up, his sword still clenched in his fist, and she drove her heel into the side of his face, cracking his head sideways, stunning him.

You make your bed with the bitch -- you mistake your crotch for your heart, Mongoljin seethed. You feel sorry for the boy and see the opportunity to make amends for the failings in your life with your own father. You know nothing of love! For five thousand years, I have loved Targutai! I have waited for this moment and I will see him have it!

Targutai tried to sit up again, reeling, and Aigiarn gritted her teeth as she punted him again, kicking him mightily, knocking him face-first into the dirt. He crumpled, lying still, knocked unconscious by the blow.

Aigiarn, Rhyden said and she turned to him, her eyes widening in bewildered surprise, her mouth dropping agape. He cut his eyes at the hilt of the anam'cladh, abandoned on the floor. He glanced back at Aigiarn, and he did not need to offer another word. She nodded once.

Rhyden turned back to Mongoljin, meeting her gaze. *You cannot keep me from it*, Mongoljin hissed.

"Yes," he said. "I can." He jerked the blade against Yisun Goyaljin's throat, feeling the sudden hot flood of her blood spray against his hand. Mongoljin shrieked,

lunging at him, rushing across the chamber, her spirit dissipating in a smoky burst. She forced herself into Yisun's dying form; Rhyden felt her convulse against his hands, and then Mongoljin threw him backward with her mind, slamming him into the barrier of the jaqa.

Bastard! Monogljin screamed, shoving her hands against Yisun's throat helplessly, trying to stave the coursing blood loss with her palms. *Do you think this will stop me? This will not even slow my efforts! I have power enough to abandon this form, to deliver Targutai to the lair! He will claim the dragons! He will face his destiny and then I will come back for you! I will claim your bitch's form -- I will trap her ami with me for all of eternity, helpless and thrashing, a witness as I use her hands -- her blade -- to open your throat as you have mine, to punch through the soft, pathetic belly of her bastard-begotten son!*

Rhyden charged Mongoljin, grappling with her. He shoved his hand over her face, dancing clumsily with her, turning her around and shoving her back against the jaqa barrier. He could feel her spirit trying to escape, to flee from Yisun's body now that she had realized the futility of her entry. His brows furrowed and he summoned all of his strength, the full power of his sight to hold her in place, to keep her trapped and struggling within Yisun's body.

You will never touch Aigiarn or Temu, he hissed inside of her head. *I will see you rot in this form, you stupid bitch -- if I have to hold you here for eternity myself, I will.*

Mongoljin stared at him, her black eyes glittering. *You cannot stop me! I love Targutai. I have loved him for countless lifetimes. I am the only mother he has ever needed and I will not fail him. There is nothing greater than a mother's love -- nothing more pure. You cannot stop it.*

Rhyden raised his brows, smiling at her. "I could not agree with you more," he said, and he stepped back as Aigiarn rammed the blade of the anam'cladh through the jaqa barrier and into Mongoljin's back. The end of the sword -- a spear of blazing, golden fire between Aigiarn's fists -- punched out between Mongoljin's breasts, clear through her heart. She had a split second to stare at Rhyden, Yisun's blood-smeared face twisting with aghast disbelief. "You...cannot..." Mongoljin said, her voice gurgling

out of Yisun's slit throat, and then she was gone, her spirit destroyed, a wispy tendril of fading smoke rising from Yisun's head toward the ceiling.

Rhyden let the woman's body topple to the ground. Aigiarn staggered on the other side of the jaqa, gawking at the fiery sword in her hands. "Ten...tengerii boshig...!" she whispered. She blinked at Rhyden, wide-eyed with shock. "Is she...is she...?"

"She is gone," Rhyden said. He stepped toward her, pressing his hand against the jaqa barrier. "You destroyed her, Aigiarn. It is you -- your love for Temu is pure within your heart. The power to wield the blade in full is yours."

"You knew," Aigiarn said. "That is why you came...why you challenged her to the jabsar. You knew..."

He dropped her a wink. "Not with certainty," he admitted. "But I had hoped."

Aigiarn managed a feeble smile, a soft, fragile laugh. She drew her hand to her bloodied face, and he caught a blur of movement from beyond her shoulder. His eyes flew wide. "Aigiarn!" he cried.

Targutai slammed a metal shield into the back of Aigiarn's head, sending her crumpling forward. She uttered a sharp, breathless grunt and then collapsed to the ground, unconscious, the anam'cladh falling from her hand.

"Surprise," Targutai whispered. His nose was broken from her boot heel, his nose and mouth streaming blood. He stared at Rhyden, his brows furrowed, his eyes filled with anguished, infuriated tears. "You killed my mother."

"This was only your mother's form," Rhyden said to the boy. "She could never have reclaimed it. Mongoljin meant to keep it for herself."

"Liar!" Targutai shrieked. At his cry, the walls of the armory shuddered, grit and dust spilling down from the walls and ceiling, hissing against the ground. Rhyden looked around, his eyes widening as he took another hedging, uncertain step back.

Targutai stooped, snatching the anam'cladh in hand. The blade seared above the tang, a brilliant spear of blue fire. "You are a liar, you bastard!" he shrieked. "You killed her and you will pay for it! You will pay for it -- I swear to you, I will draw it out of you measure by measure, you rot damn bastard!"

He levitated in the air, his gutal rising from the ground. As he rose, the armory walls shook again, harder this time. Rhyden heard the grinding sound of taxed stone as

cracks began to shoot across the floor, branching out in broad, widening spiderweb patterns. More debris and grit tumbled from the walls as fissures splintered here, as well. Relief sculptures carved eons ago began to crumble and split, falling in broken pieces to the ground.

“Mathair Maith!” Rhyden gasped.

Targutai flew at the jaqa barrier, screaming in furious grief, swinging the anam’cladh wildly. The fiery blade pierced the invisible wall Temu had erected, and Targutai passed it easily, hurtling toward Rhyden, blue fire blazing in his eyes. Rhyden recoiled as the boy attacked him, driving the anam’cladh for his heart. “I will kill you!” Targutai screeched.

Rhyden floundered backward, dissipating his spirit just as Targutai plowed into the space his spirit form had occupied. The blade of the anam’cladh punched down, swooping into the ground, and Targutai wrenched it loose, hovering three feet above the ground.

“Bastard coward!” he screamed, spinning in all directions, looking for Rhyden. “Show yourself! I know you are here, you murdering bastard! Show yourself!”

Rhyden coalesced his form behind Targutai. “Mongoljin murdered your mother,” he said, and Targutai whirled to him. “Not me, lad. I only -- ”

“You lie!” Targutai shrieked, and he thrust his hand forward, collapsing the wall behind Rhyden, sending tons of earth and debris spilling down upon him with a thunderous roar and an explosive cloud of dust. Rhyden flinched reflexively; in his spirit form, he could not be injured as the mounds of broken stone and dirt toppled harmlessly around him, but the ferocity, the sheer intensity of Targutai’s rage and power startled him.

He looked up in horror as he heard the ceiling groaning. Large sections of it began to fall, crashing against the ground. Aigiarn’s crumpled form disappeared beneath a pile of collapsing stone and dust, and he rushed to help her. “Aigiarn!”

He recoiled, stumbling back as Targutai launched himself in attack again, swinging the anam’cladh. Through the thick cloud of grit, all Rhyden could see was the blurred silhouette of the boy rushing at him, and the blazing spear of the anam’cladh’s blade whistling as it sliced through the air. “Hoah!” he cried, staggering as the blazing tip

nicked the front of his form, sending a searing bolt of pain through him at its glancing blow.

Targutai spun the hilt between his hands and drove it for Rhyden's chest, aiming for his heart. Rhyden dissipated his form again, vanishing less than a second in full before the blade smashed into rubble behind him. He reappeared behind the boy, and held his hand out, using his sight to lift some of the debris from the ground, launching it at Targutai. He did not want to hurt the boy; merely to knock the anam'cladh from his hand, to get the sword from his grasp. "Listen to me..." he began.

Targutai whirled. The debris repelled away from him as he caught sight of it; it hurtled with a hundred-fold more speed and force back at Rhyden. "No!" he cried. "You are made of lies! You killed my mother, you bastard rot!"

Rhyden threw his arms up instinctively, hunching his shoulders as the heavy rocks punched through his ami, smashing into the wall behind him. The impact shivered through the ancient chamber, and more of the walls and ceiling toppled. "Stop it!" Rhyden cried. "Stop it, Targutai! You will cave the mountain in on us!"

"You cannot stop me!" Targutai screamed. "Do your worst -- try it, you bastard! I will bring Ondur Dobu down on you -- on all of you bastard Oirat! I will kill you all!"

A peculiar grinding sound shuddered through the air, and Targutai turned. Rhyden followed the sound with his gaze, lowering his hands from his face, and he gasped in new horror to see that the door to the lair tunnel had slid open; the shaking of the surrounding walls had jarred it, triggering its release mechanism.

"Temu!" Rhyden whispered, his eyes widening. He blinked at Targutai, not missing the wicked, triumphant grin that darted across the boy's blood-smeared face. "No...Temu...!"

When Targutai moved, swooping through the air for the opened threshold like a hawk descending upon a hapless mouse, Rhyden dissipated his form, reappearing in the doorway, blocking Targutai's passage. "No," he said, his brows furrowed. He shoved his hand toward the boy, and Targutai whipped in the air, snapping back like he was caught on a line. He crashed to the ground, and then levitated again, rushing up, brandishing the anam'cladh, his face twisted in a snarl.

“Get out of my way!” he shrieked, and he thrust his palm at Rhyden, his fingers curled into claws. Rhyden felt something akin to an invisible boulder plow into his chest, and he flew backward, smashing into the wall of the lair tunnel. Targutai began to close his fingers into a fist, and Rhyden felt the air around him collapsing, enfolding him.

He is binding me! Rhyden thought. *He is binding my spirit here, trapping me so he can run me through with the anam’cladh!*

Trejaeran had always possessed tremendous power, the likes of which Rhyden had not even been able to imagine. He had never seen Trejaeran unleash that power in full, but he felt it now as Targutai brandished it against him. He could feel the strength, the brutal, primal power Targutai commanded -- power that had once been Trejaeran’s - - and at last, Rhyden understood how Trejaeran might have been tempted, tormented by the capacity to use that power for dark purpose.

Mathair Maith...! he thought, struggling against Targutai’s binding spell. It had not grasped him in full, but he had only split seconds before he would be trapped and helpless against the boy and the blade. Rhyden glanced toward where Aigiarn had fallen, dismayed. *I cannot leave her,* he thought. He looked over his shoulder, down the darkened length of the tunnel leading to the lair. *I cannot leave Temu...not now...not against this...against Targutai...!*

“You cannot stop me!” Targutai shrieked. “You cannot keep me from the dragons! They are mine, and I will not let Temuchin Arightei have them!”

“The dragons are not yours!” Rhyden shouted. “They never have been! They have always belonged to Temuchin, and the Oirat! Mongoljin lied to you and your people. She murdered Ag’iamon! She poisoned him, and tricked Borjigidal into thinking Duua was Dobun when he named him the heir. All of this...it is all because of her lies!”

“You are the liar,” Targutai hissed, rearing the anam’cladh back to run him through. “You are the murderer, not Mongoljin!”

There was no more time; Rhyden felt Targutai’s power crushing against him, holding him fast. He closed his eyes, summoning all of his strength -- every ounce of power he possessed -- and dissipated his form, escaping from the chamber and returning to his body. Just as his form faded in a wisp of golden, iridescent smoke, Targutai rammed the sword through the space where his heart had only just been.

“You bastard!” Targutai shrieked, even though Rhyden was gone, his ami escaped for his body. “You rot bastard! I will claim the dragons and then I will come for you! Do you hear me, Rhyden Fabhcun? I will come for you!”

Chapter Twelve

Temu stood at the end of the tunnel beyond the secret doorway in the armory. He had been standing there, frozen in helpless dismay, for at least ten minutes, looking left and right along the intersecting length of corridor that stretched before him in opposing directions.

Rhyden did not say anything about having to turn, Temu thought for at least the millionth time. He blinked against distraught tears and pressed his lips together, determined not to cry. He only said the door was hidden in the armory, and the tunnel beyond that. Nothing about turning left or right when the tunnel ended!

Rhyden probably did not think he would not be at this point with you, another part of Temu's mind said softly. He is the golden falcon. He is supposed to lead you to the lair, not tell you how to get there and turn you loose beneath the mountain.

Temu had tried to reach Rhyden with his mind, to ask him which passage he was supposed to follow, but he still could not sense the Elf at all. *It is the jaqa I made, he realized, aghast. Nothing can get past it. I made it too strong. Mongoljin and Targutai cannot cross it -- but Rhyden cannot, either, and neither can I! My hiimori will not pass it to reach him. I...I am all alone here!*

This thought made him want to cry all the more, and he whimpered, staring down either length of the bisecting tunnel, his despair only mounting. He cradled the lamp between his palms. Its feeble glow had faded all the more, its oil almost expended. He did not have much time left, not if he meant to find the lair without stumbling around in darkness, that was.

"Where do I go?" he whispered, his voice tremulous. He did not know how far the armory was from the lair. He could potentially waste hours wandering beneath the mountain if he turned down the wrong path. even if he discovered his erring and turned around again, there would still not be enough time, not with his lamp's failing light, and with Targutai and Mongoljin so close behind him at the armory threshold. *If I do not reach it first, then it will all have been for nothing, he thought. All of this -- Yeb dying,*

and my father...and Trejaeran...all of the Oirat for all of these millennia...all of it for nothing if Targutai finds the lair first.

He started to follow the right fork of the tunnel and then paused, looking over his shoulder, blinking uncertainly to his left. *Which is the right way?* He closed his eyes, struggling to open his mind, to force his hiimori outward. *Rhyden, please, I need you! Tell me what to do. Tell me which way to go!*

There was no reply. There was only the long corridor before and behind him, a seemingly endless series of squared archways carved in relief out of the stone with a vaulted ceiling of granite overhead. The lamplight played off of countless stone pillars lining the walls, danced against the smooth, unadorned planes of stones that lay between each pair, framed by each arch. There were no stories depicted in carvings on these walls or columns, no paintings, mosaics or even hewn hieroglyphs -- nothing to lend any clue whatsoever as to which corridor led to the lair. Temu sat down in one of the archways, pressing his spine against the stone wall, tucking his shoulder against the pillar. He huddled here, drawing his knees toward his chest, setting the lamp aside. He wrapped his arms around his knees and began to shiver, his breath hiccupping beneath his chest, his eyes burning with tears.

“Rhyden, please,” he whispered, lowering his face, pressing his forehead against his knees. “Mamma, I...I do not know where to go.” His hand fluttered against his chest, his fingers hooking about the ongon that dangled over his heart. “Father,” he pleaded. “Father, help me!”

I know you are real, he thought, closing his eyes tightly. Please. You showed me how to open the armory door. I know that was you. I know it was not just my hiimori, my mind showing me the way. Yeb was right. You are with me. I know you are. I believe in you even if I cannot see you. I believe in you. Please, show me what to do.

He noticed a faint glow seeping through his eyelids. It was not the yellow, feeble light of his lantern; it was a soft, pale shade of green. He felt something brush against the top of his head, something warm, like a sunbeam spilling upon him, and he jerked, opening his eyes, startled and bewildered. As he looked up, images and voices suddenly flashed through his mind, as if he had been jerked out of the tunnels and shoved forcibly into another place, a foreign landscape. Temu found himself standing in

the midst of a tremendous army -- thousands of unfamiliar warriors gathered together, preparing for an attack. They rode astride all sorts of enormous, magnificent beasts, most of which, Temu had never seen before in his days. There were bergelmirs and horses, but more than these, there were gigantic elk taller than any man, with broad antler spanning farther than Temu could ever hope to stretch his hands. There were giant, brawny rams, their heavy woolen coats laden with armor plates. This immense cavalry stood together in relative silence. The wind was cold, the morrow was new, and Temu could see the hints of distant mountains, like murky shadows along the horizon behind him.

Enghan, he thought. They are Enghan. They are standing at the border of Ulus. They are readying to face the empire.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Temu heard a voice say, and he turned, his eyes widening as he recognized the man nearest to him, a man astride a bergelmir. The man was dressed in a tattered, dirty blue overcoat and tricorne hat, the sort of fashions worn by imperial citizens. His skin was dark, like tanned hide, and Temu realized he had seen him before. He had seen this dark man aboard the ship with Rhyden, in that dream so long ago when he had heard Rhyden say that his name, *Fabhcun* meant *falcon* in Gaeilgen.

“Aedhir,” he whispered. *It is Rhyden’s friend -- Aedhir Fainne! He is not dead! The Enghan did not kill him after all. He rides among them as their friend!*

“No,” said the man next to Aedhir, an Enghan with a russet beard, his long hair caught back in plaits, drawn away from his face. He glanced at Aedhir, and the two men managed to smile and laugh feebly. “I do not think I will ever be sure. But I have to do this. There is no other way.”

Temu blinked and then a stone wall appeared before him, the Enghan army disappearing. He saw portions of a broad, engraved stone panel flashing in front of him, series upon series of rune characters. As each darted before him, as if illuminated by lightning, he heard voices in his head, a cacophony of overlapping, whispering words.

*Behold the Seal of the Seven Ancient Abhacan Kings of Tirgeimhreadh...
by this mark you shall know him*

...Argos, Eremedius, Demetrieg, Sarthos, Chloethos, Maradein and Edeiros...

by this mark, he shall pass

*...let all races of the known Bith heed the Great Marks -- cross this sacred
Threshold unbidden and know despair...*

by this mark, he shall call to us

*...by the ancient command, I do release the Seal of Tirgeimhreadh, and all the
might contained beyond its sacred mark.*

and by this mark, we shall rise.

“Hoah -- !” Temu gasped, his eyes flying wide. He scuttled backwards, his shoulders, the back of his head smacking against the wall behind him, and he blinked, disoriented and bewildered as the visions faded, the murmurs waning into silence in his mind.

He was alone in the tunnel. The green glow had faded, and there was only the dim light of his lamp to see by. Temu looked around, puzzled. “Father?” he whispered. The green light had been Yesugei’s gerel; Temu knew it in his heart. Yesugei had come to him -- the closest Temu had ever known to catching a glimpse of his utha suld. Yesugei had come, and just as he always had, he had shown Temu images, visions no other shaman would have been able to see.

You must hurry, a voice whispered suddenly within Temu’s mind, startling him. Another vision flashed through his mind -- he could see Targutai coming. Targutai had left the armory and was following the tunnel now. He could feel the Kagan like a terrible storm front rushing down the passage, or the leading edge of a tremendous, roaring wave bearing down at him. Targutai could fly; he commanded Trejaeran’s power with brutal familiarity, and he plowed headlong down the passageway toward Temu. He did not look human. Rage had twisted his blood-smeared face with furious, murderous determination, and his eyes were ablaze with Trejaeran’s gerel -- blue fire like the blade the anam’cladh curled in his fist.

Temu’s eyes flew wide with fear and alarm, and he pressed himself further into his little corner. “I do not know where to go, Father. What do I do? Rhyden did not tell me. He...he thought he would be with me...to...to guide me, and he...”

He felt something brush against the shelf his chin, like gentle, unseen fingertips. It felt as though sunlight had just pressed against Temu’s face, and suddenly Temu

knew which direction to follow, the passage that would lead him to the lair. His father's spirit had touched him, and he knew without Yesugei saying another word. He closed his eyes, trembling as his tears spilled.

You must hurry, Yesugei said again, and Temu nodded.

"I will," he said. "I will, Father."

He scrambled to his feet, grabbing the lamp. He began to run, following the path his father had shown to him, the passageway leading to the right. He tried to cradle his hand around the wick, feeling the fluttering, waning flame lick against his hand as he bolted. He could feel Targutai coming. Within his mind, he could sense Targutai drawing near, the blazing blue light of his stolen gerel growing brighter, closer. Temu's gutal pounded against the dirt and he panted for breath, running as hard and as fast as he could.

Please, he thought, sparing darting, frantic glances over his shoulder, expecting each time to see blue light spilling against the corridor walls behind him; Targutai rounding the bend and rushing toward him. *Please, just let me reach the lair first. Please do not let him find me. I cannot fight him. I do not know how. Please do not let him find me.*

He followed the passage for at least ten minutes until at last he stumbled out into an expansive chamber. He staggered to a halt, his legs trembling, his breath hiccupping from exertion. He stared around him, his eyes widening, his mouth agape. "Bugger me!" he whispered.

The chamber fanned outward from the mouth of the tunnel in a broad circumference. The walls were lined with the same squared arches as the corridors beyond and the vaulted ceiling overhead was supported by massive columns hewn from granite, each towering more than sixty feet in height, and more than thirty feet in circumference. Deep fissures had been deliberately carved into the ceilings, hollowed chimneys in the stone that allowed sunlight from beyond the mountain slopes to drape down into the room. Pale light spilled against the floor, splayed along the broad shafts of the columns. Temu stepped hesitantly into one of the puddles of sunlight, watching his shadow splay along the floor beneath him.

Directly across the chamber from the entrance, he saw a stone door framed by an archway of stone. The door stood at least twenty feet high, and fifteen feet wide, and had been marked with an enormous, intricately carved seal, a large circle of pictograms and rune characters, flanked and framed by more runes hewn into the stone.

The lair...! Temu thought, breathless with wonder. He forgot about Targutai in his sudden, dumbstruck awe. He walked toward the threshold, his head craning back on his neck as he drew near. *It is the doorway to the lair!*

He stood before the towering door, gazing up at it. The engraved writing was unfamiliar to him, but Temu knew Rhyden could have read it. The gazriin ezen had given its memories to Rhyden, its understanding of the ancient and otherwise forgotten characters, and Rhyden would have been able to translate the archaic inscription. Temu reached up, draping his hand against the cold granite, and as his fingertips brushed against the stone, the visions his father had given to him flashed in his mind again.

“Behold the Seal of the Seven Ancient Abhacan Kings of Tirgeimhreadh,” Temu whispered, following the outermost ring of writing. He stepped slowly to his right, lifting his chin, studying the arc of the runes. “Argos, Eremedius, Demetrieg, Sarthos, Chloethos, Maradein and Edeiros...”

His gaze traveled to the bottom of the circular seal, where the inscription continued from left to right along the bottom. “Let all races of the known Bith heed the Great Marks -- cross this sacred Threshold unbidden and know despair.”

Inside of the seal, more words had been engraved. “By this mark, you shall know him,” Temu breathed, reciting aloud, the images of the characters and their meanings flashing instantaneously within his mind. “By this mark, he shall pass...by this mark, he shall command us, and by this mark...” His fingertips trailed lightly against the edge of the seal. “...we shall rise,” he whispered. “By the ancient command, I do release the Seal of Tirgeimhreadh, and all the might contained beyond its sacred mark.”

He sensed something behind him, like the roar of rushing wind, and he pivoted, glancing over his shoulder, his eyes flying wide. He did not see what hit him; there was nothing visible, but a tremendous force slammed into his side, plowing him off of his feet and battering the breath from his lungs. He flew through the air, crashing into the wall, crying out sharply, breathlessly as his shoulder, the side of his head struck the stone.

He crumpled to the ground, landing hard on his belly, and lay there motionless and stunned, gasping for air.

“Get away from my lair,” he heard Targutai hiss, and he raised his head, his vision reeling. Targutai had entered the chamber, and floated above the ground in the middle of the room. His form was ablaze with the blue light of his *gerel*; it engulfed his entire body. The *anam’cladh* seared in his fist, and he glared at Temu from beneath furrowed brows, his eyes glowing with blue fire, his mouth twisted in a sneer.

Father, help me! Temu thought, his eyes widening in fear. He shoved his hands beneath him and sat up, scuttling back, pedaling his gutal heels in the dirt. Targutai moved toward him, gliding through the air, and Temu pressed his shoulders, his spine against the wall, trembling in stark terror.

“It...it is not your lair,” he whimpered, and he covered when the cleft between Targutai’s brows deepened.

“It is mine!” he shrieked, and shoved his hand at Temu. Again, that terrifying, invisible force slammed into the boy, and he was whipped from the ground, tumbling pate over heels into the air. He cried out, his voice *whoofing* to an abrupt halt as he again slammed into the wall and collapsed. He huddled against the ground, struggling to get his hands and knees beneath him, to rise.

“It is mine!” Targutai screamed again. “My lair! My dragons! My rot damn destiny -- not yours! You cannot have it!”

He thrust his hand at Temu, his fingers splayed and hooked. Temu threw his own hands before him, and grunted as he caught Targutai’s proffered blow against his palms, as one might an invisible ball. The force of the impact shoved him back, his feet and knees plowing deep troughs in the loose soil and gravel of the ground. He could feel Targutai’s power thrumming between his hands, as though he had seized hold of something alive and thrashing, and he stared at the other boy, his eyes enormous with alarm.

“You are wrong,” he said, and he opened his hands, releasing the shuddering energy between his fingers, sending it careening across the chamber at Targutai. It slammed into the Kagan, snapping him back in the air as if a boulder had been

catapulted against his chest. He plowed into a pillar; Temu heard him utter a breathless grunt at the impact, and then he fell to the ground.

“Please,” Temu said, leaning against the wall as he rose to his feet. He held out his hand toward Targutai, imploring. “Please, do not do this. I do not want to fight you.”

“I do not want to fight you, either,” Targutai seethed, lifting his head from the ground. He locked eyes with Temu, and Temu shied away. “I want to kill you,” Targutai said, and he drew his knees beneath him, standing. He clutched the anam’cladh in hand, the blue fire of its blade bathing him in pale, ghastly light. “I want to wrench your ami from your miserable, bastard-rot form and I want to send you shrieking and writhing into the rot damn qarang’qui. I want you to know eternal darkness. I want you to spend every moment of the rest of time suffering for what you have done to me.”

He launched himself at Temu, rushing through the air, flying toward him. Temu recoiled in a panic, throwing his hands out, using his hiimori to drive Targutai back, sending him sprawling sideways in midair and crashing into another pillar. “I have done nothing to you!” he cried.

“You stole my marks!” Targutai shrieked, crouched against the ground. His hand shot out at Temu; it felt like he drove his fist directly into Temu’s chin. His head snapped back on his neck, and he was knocked off his feet, sprawling against the ground. Temu felt something snatch hold of the front of his del, jerking against the heavy flap of fur-lined hide, wrenching it open to reveal the cluster of birthmarks on his breast. He heard the wooden buttons holding it closed at his shoulder snap loose of their moorings, and he felt the frigid air against his exposed chest.

“Your shaman burned them into your breast, but they are mine!” Targutai shouted, rising again. “He stole my gerel -- they stripped my powers from me and gave them to you -- but now I have found another!”

He hooked his fingers in the air, and Temu heard the wall behind him yield in a sudden, toppling landslide. He cried out, scrambling to move as rock and rubble caved in behind him, shuddering against the ground as it collapsed.

“Yeb did not steal anything from you!” Temu cried. He glanced over his shoulder at the debris, and then turned to Targutai, his brows narrowing. The rocks and fallen earth shifted and moved, rising into the air, flying across the narrow space between the

two boys. Targutai recoiled, throwing his hands out; as if he had summoned an invisible shield, the rubble bounced around him, deflected in a broad circumference.

“The gerel is mine!” Temu shouted. “The Dologhon marks are mine -- my powers are my own! You are the one burned by shamans, not me! You are the one with stolen powers! Mongoljin took them from Trejaeran! They belong to him!”

He thrust his hand at Targutai, using his hiimori to batter Targutai in the side of the head. He fell sideways, blood spraying from his nose as he yelped. The anam’cladh fell from his hand, and when he reached for it, his fingers outstretched and fumbling, Temu snatched it with his mind, jerking it toward him. The silver hilt skittered across the ground, flashing in the sunlight, and then rose in the air, sailing for Temu’s awaiting hand.

“She stole this sword, too!” Temu cried. “It belongs to Rhyden!”

Targutai reached for the anam’cladh, his brows furrowed. Temu felt a mighty jerking sensation in his mind as Targutai grabbed the sword hilt in the air, pulling against it. The two began to tussle over the sword, each of them frowning as they struggled with their hiimori to yank the weapon toward them.

“Let go of it!” Targutai yelled. “Let go, you bastard! It is mine now! Mongoljin gave it to me! It belongs to me!”

Temu could feel Targutai overpowering him for the sword; he stumbled forward, gritting his teeth, hooking his hand as he grasped for the hilt. “It is not yours!” he cried. “It is Rhyden’s! Trejaeran gave it to him! You cannot have it!”

Targutai shoved his other hand forward, and Temu’s feet were knocked from beneath him. He fell to the ground, yelping, his mental grip on the anam’cladh slipping free. The hilt flew back to Targutai, slapping against his palm. When Temu raised his head, reaching desperately for the sword again, Targutai sent the wall crumbling down, collapsing on Temu. Temu cried out, throwing his hands over his head as tons of rubble and stone suddenly crashed around him, engulfing him in a choking cloud of grit and dust.

“You cannot keep me from it,” Targutai said, closing his hand about the hilt, the blue blade of the anam’cladh appearing again. “Not the sword or the dragons.” He stared at the mound of fallen debris, watching as the dust waned, and the last of the grit

and gravel tumbled to the ground, burying Temu beneath. "I am the Negh," Targutai said. "You are nothing."

Temu opened his eyes, blinking in startled amazement to realize he had not been crushed beneath the collapsed wall. Somehow, without even meaning to, he had enveloped himself in a protective bubble of energy, a barrier that had shielded him from the toppling rubble and protected him still, even with tons of stone and earth spilled atop it. He unfurled his legs, rising to his feet; as he stood, the shroud of energy around him shoved the rubble aside, freeing him from the mound.

Targutai stared at him in stricken disbelief, his eyes enormous as Temu met his gaze. "I am the Negh," Temu said, closing his hands into fists. "Not you. You have been lied to your whole life, and I am sorry for that. It is not my fault. I did not ask for this. Neither of us did. But I am the Negh, not you. This is my destiny -- not yours, Targutai."

"Liar!" Targutai shrieked, launching himself headlong at Temu. He summoned all of the debris around them to rise, and Temu cowered as tons of rock and rubble slammed into the walls around him, smashed into the invisible barrier he had summoned around himself, forcing him to stumble back. Targutai plowed into him, and the two crashed backwards into the wall. Temu felt the granite behind him crumble at the impact of the blow. The boys grappled together, struggling, suspended in the air, smashed against the wall by their hiimori. Targutai thrashed against Temu, and Temu fought wildly beneath him, trying to ward off Targutai's flying fists, his swinging sword.

"You lying bastard!" Targutai screamed, hooking his legs around Temu's waist as he grasped the anam'cladh between his fists and stabbed at Temu with it. A spray of bloody spittle and a stream of profanities flew from his mouth as he struck at Temu, shrieking. "Bastard! Rot damn lying bastard whelp! I will kill you! I will kill you, you bastard!"

Temu twisted, wrenching himself sideways. He felt the fiery blade slice through his del, searing through the thick hide, burning his skin and he screamed. Targutai raised the sword again, and Temu clasped his hands about his wrists, fighting to hold the blade back. He threw himself forward with his hiimori, flipping Targutai over, smashing his shoulders and spine against the wall so that he now leaned over the Kagan.

“You cannot have it!” he cried, struggling to keep his grip on Targutai’s wrists as he thrashed beneath him. He tried to hook his hand against the hilt of the anam’cladh, using both his hiimori and his fingers to try and seize hold of the sword. His terror had dissipated, replaced in full by outrage and anger. He turned loose of Targutai’s wrist with his right hand, balling his fingers into a fist and punching at the Kagan. “Let go of it!” he screamed. “Let go of it! Give it to me!”

Targutai threw Temu off of him in a brutal burst of hiimori. Temu flew backward; as he did, he reached out with his own hiimori, seizing hold of the anam’cladh, wrenching it from Targutai’s grasp. He slammed into one of the stone columns, crying out sharply at the impact, and crashed to the ground. He heard the clatter of metal against stone as the anam’cladh hilt bounced against the ground, and he scrambled to his feet, racing to grab it.

“No!” Targutai screamed, shoving his hand toward the sword, snatching it with his hiimori. Temu dove for it as it whipped across the floor. He landed hard on his belly, catching the hilt between his hands and jerking it against his stomach beneath him. He did not even have time to close his fists about it in full, to summon the blade, before Targutai was upon, pouncing heavily against Temu’s back, crushing the breath from him.

“Give it to me!” Targutai shrieked, hooking his hands in Temu’s hair and slamming his head against the ground. Temu reeled, seeing stars dance before him. He struggled beneath Targutai, feeling the Kagan’s legs clamp against his hips, pinning him still. Targutai grabbed him by the scruff of his del, jerking at his clothes, fighting with him.

“Get off of me!” Temu yelled.

“Give it to me, you rot!” Targutai screamed, pounding his fists against the back of Temu’s head, his shoulders. He clamped his hands around Temu’s face, his fingers clawing at Temu’s eyes, and Temu yowled, thrashing.

“Let go of me!” he cried, trying to keep the anam’cladh in his hand. The tang of the hilt shoved painfully into his gut, and his wrist was trapped beneath him, craned at an agonizing angle. Targutai continued gouging at his face with one hand, and leaned

over, shoving his other hand beneath Temu's chest, pawing for the sword. Temu shook his head furiously, trying to ward off his clawing fingers. "No -- stop it -- !"

"Give it to me!" Targutai screamed again, his fingertips hooking into the corner of Temu's eye. Pain lanced through Temu's skull, and he bucked beneath Targutai, shrugging his shoulders and crying out hoarsely.

Temu felt Targutai's hand grope against his own, his fingers splayed, fumbling for the hilt. He cried out again, squirming, kicking his feet. He struggled, straining his wrist as he tried to close his hand around the hilt. Targutai pawed against him, grasping clumsily, and then both of them curled their hands about the hilt in unison, their fingers interlocking, shoving against one another. There was a brilliant burst of blue light from beneath Temu's torso, a searing fire that made them both cry out and recoil, blinded and stunned. Temu felt the blade punch through his chest, fire searing through him and he screamed just as the blade speared out between his shoulders, shoving into Targutai's breast as well. Targutai shrieked in Temu's ear, and then fell away, crumpling onto his side, clutching at his heart.

Temu dropped the anam'cladh, his hands darting for his breast as he gasped helplessly for breath, his body wracked with pain. The hilt dropped to the ground, and the blade extinguished. For a long moment, there were no sounds whatsoever in the chamber except for the pained gasps for breath from the boys, their soft, overlapping moans.

"Tengerii...boshig..." Temu whimpered, his eyes closed, tears streaming down his cheeks. He had never felt such terrible pain in all of his life. He could scarcely move, much less draw breath in full as he felt the fire of the anam'cladh slowly dim within his body, loosening its crippling hold on his limbs.

Targutai groaned, moving slowly, feebly, his hands fumbling against the graveled ground. "What...what happened...?" he gasped, his voice dissolving into a hurting, tremulous moan.

Temu opened his eyes and blinked at the anam'cladh hilt on the ground before him. *We ran ourselves through*, he thought, grimacing as a spasm of pain shivered through him. *We were both holding the anam'cladh...we summoned the blade...Tengerii boshig, both of us were impaled...!*

He shoved his hand against the ground and struggled to raise his head. He sat up, moaning softly, pressing the heels of his palms against his brow as he reeled. His head felt funny, heavy somehow, as if his skull had been stuffed full of wool. It took a long moment before he realized to his dismay that it was because his mind -- only moments before opened in full as he called upon his hiimori -- had slammed shut like a trap door. He could not extend his hiimori; he could not sense anything. He could not even feel his hiimori within him. The sensation of its power, usually present within him was gone.

Oh...oh, no...! he thought. He looked at the anam'cladh hilt, trying to move it with his mind, to will it toward him. It did not move. Temu looked down at his chest, drawing the torn flap of his del aside and blinking against distraught tears as he saw the angry, red weal above his heart, just missing the marks of the seven stars on his breast. *It pierced my heart*, he realized.

The same idea of snatching the anam'cladh with hiimori had apparently occurred to Targutai, as well -- with the same futile results -- because the Kagan whimpered in bewilderment, sitting up, blinking dazedly. "What...what is wrong...?" he groaned, shoving his hand against his temple and wincing. "My powers! Why will my powers not work?"

Temu looked at him over his shoulder. "The anam'cladh," he whispered.

Targutai blinked at him in confusion. "What?"

"The anam'cladh," Temu said again. "It pierced us...both of us. It went through our hearts."

Targutai blinked again, his brows furrowing. "So?" he said, his voice stronger now as his anger reignited. "So what? What does that mean? We are not spirits."

"But we have hiimori," Temu whispered, feeling dismayed tears burn his eyes. "We *had* hiimori, anyway."

Targutai frowned. "What do you mean, *had* hiimori?" he demanded. "I still have hiimori. Maybe yours is gone, but I am the Negh. My hiimori is with me. It is mine by right -- by birth, it belongs to me. You stole yours. Mine was always supposed to be mine!"

Temu bristled, his brows pinching. "You stole yours -- not me," he said. "And yours is gone, too. Both of us -- it is gone. The anam'cladh drove it from us. Yours has gone back to Trejaeran. It belongs to him, not you." He blinked in realization. *He can break free of the qarang'qui now, he thought. He must have been trapped there before without his hiimori, but it will return to him now. He will grow strong again, just like Rhyden said. He can go free.*

Targutai's brows furrowed more deeply, and he punted Temu. "You shut up," he snapped. He shoved his hand at the anam'cladh, but the hilt did not move. Targutai gasped in frustration, thrusting his hand again and again toward the sword. He turned to Temu, his face flushed with enraged color. "You bastard," he seethed. "What have you done to me, you Oirat rot?"

"It was not me," Temu said. "I did not do it. We both did it. We both touched the sword."

"You liar!" Targutai cried, and he sprang at Temu, tackling him. Temu cried out, sprawling backward, landing hard against his belly. Targutai straddled him, and began swinging his fists wildly, pummeling Temu in the face. Temu cried out again, trying to ward off the blows. "You rot damn liar!" Targutai screamed. "What have you done to me? What have you done?"

He clamped his hands around Temu's throat, the heels of his palms mashing against Temu's windpipe, immediately snuffing his breath. Temu gagged, struggling, his eyes bulging as he whooped vainly for air. He pawed frantically at Targutai's hands, kicking his feet, squirming vainly.

"You...rot...damn...liar...!" Targutai hissed, his words punctuated with violent shoves against Temu's throat. He leaned over Temu, putting his full weight behind his hands as he throttled the boy, his face twisted with fury. "I will kill you, you lying, stupid Oirat bastard!"

Temu saw shadows swooping down into his line of sight, a heavy, drooping darkness descending up him, broken by tiny pinpoints of light that sparkled before his eyes. He wheezed, trying to plead, unable to force even a minute breath past Targutai's hands. His struggles began to wane, his mind began to fade, and he made soft, helpless hiccupping sounds.

“Rot...damn...” Targutai said, and then he glanced up and froze. His voice trailed off, and his eyes widened. His hands slackened against Temu’s throat, and when Temu bucked beneath him, shoving him away, he did not resist. He slumped sideways, not averting his gaze, his mouth falling agape.

Temu rolled onto his side, panting for desperate breath, clutching at his throat. He sucked in greedy mouthfuls of air until he choked. He coughed until he gagged, and raised himself from the ground, supporting himself with his hands as he retched. He scuttled away from Targutai, turning toward the Kagan, expecting another blindsided attack at any second. When he realized what had distracted Targutai, he froze, his breath tangled in his throat, his eyes flying wide. “Bugger me!”

The heavy shadow draping down toward him as Targutai had strangled him had not been his imagination.

The lair! Temu thought, as he saw that the engraved door stood open wide.
Tengerii boshig...it is open...!

The door was opened, and a dragon had emerged. It towered above the two boys and nearly twenty feet high. Its enormous wings hooked forward, its shoulders hunkered as it used the wings for forelimbs, supporting it as it crept slowly across the threshold. Sunlight, murky with dust and grit in the air, fell against its cerulean skin, draping in the shadows of its musculature, along the contours of its pebbled hide. It peered at the boys with large amber eyes, eyes bisected by narrow, dark slits, like a serpent’s. It huffed a slow breath through its nose, a breath that escaped in a nearly mournful low from the soaring arc of its hollow pate crest.

They could see other hulking silhouettes behind it, other dragons moving slowly toward the threshold, creeping curiously for the dappled sunlight. The dragons’ eyes glittered and flashed from the darkness, dozens of them crowding together, clucking at one another, murmuring in soft groans from their pates.

“The dragons...” Targutai breathed, scrambling to his feet. He stared up at the cerulean beast as it moved toward them, its shadow spilling upon them. Targutai’s eyes were wide, and so was his grin. He beamed up at the dragon, his mouth spread in a broad, triumphant smile. “My dragons!” he cried, holding his arms outstretched as if he meant to greet them with an embrace. “My dragons!”

Temu said nothing. He rose unsteadily to his feet, stumbling in place, blinking in uncertain awe at the dragon as it approached. He shied back, stumbling as the magnificent animal lowered its head. It brought its long, angular snout toward Targutai and Temu could see the flaps of its nostril flutter as it huffed a breath, rustling Targutai's clothing and hair, sniffing him.

"You are mine," Targutai whispered in wonder, draping his hands against its nose momentarily before it drew its head away. "All of you are mine. I have come for you."

The dragon swung its neck toward Temu, dropping its head again. Temu stumbled back another step, frightened. He tried to backpedal, but could not move, and his eyes widened in alarm.

Dragons have hiimori, he thought, frightened. *It is using its hiimori to hold me still!*

The dragon snuffled him curiously, its breath hot and moist as it huffed against Temu's face.

"Kill him," Targutai said, and the dragon blinked. It moved its head away from Temu, turning to look down at Targutai.

"Kill him," Targutai said again, thrusting his forefinger at Temu. "He planned to trick you. "He and his kin -- the Oirat -- they have planned to trick you all along."

Oirat, said the dragon, its voice rumbling through Temu's mind and body like thunder. The boy trembled at the sensation of this massive, ancient being inside of him, and he again tried vainly to move, to shy away.

"Stupid savages," Targutai said, turning to Temu, his eyes gleaming with malicious humor. "They thought you were ignorant. They thought they could fool the Tengri -- and you."

The Oirat are allies to Dobun, the dragon remarked, and at this, Temu felt a rustling of other dragon thoughts within his mind, harrumphing and murmuring together in concurrence.

Were the legends wrong? he thought, stricken. *Tengerii boshig, was Targutai right? Is he really supposed to be the Negh? The dragons are listening to him -- is he really the Negh after all?*

"This is Dobun's bastard whelp," Targutai said. "Dobun -- the one who tricked you. The one who locked you in here so long ago."

The dragon studied Temu for a long moment. Other dragons shambled out of the lair behind it, hauling themselves forward by hooking their wing talons into the dirt, stumbling clumsily from the confines of the threshold.

“I have come for you,” Targutai said. “I am the one you have been waiting for -- the mighty Duua’s heir, the sacred son of the seven. I am He Who Shall Pass -- the one whose birth you have longed for, whose voice you hear, whose command you heed. I am the chosen and promised one, destiny’s favored son -- the hero of legends and prophecy -- the triumphant one who has restored the Tegsh. I am lord of dragons and men whose power shall restore the ancient and mighty empire of Ulus.” He opened the front of his shirt, drawing aside the flap of hide to reveal the Dologhon marks on his breast. “I have come to claim you! I am the Negh!”

The dragon looked down at him. *No*, it said simply. *You are not.*

Chapter Thirteen

“Those two look strong,” Wen remarked, pausing before one of the cramped cells in the carcer. She wore a fur-lined redingdote about her dress, with the hood, trimmed in fur, drawn over her head. She walked with her hands tucked inside of her muff, her arm hooked congenially through Aulus’. She slipped her hand from her muff and tapped her finger at a group of Minghan standing on the other side of the iron bars. “And those over there, the three of them.”

She glanced at an incarcerated Khahl man named Bedugun out of the corner of her gaze. She had met him the night before; after leaving Pryce’s side, she had gone to the carcer, seized with new and dogged resolve to escape. She had spoken in turn with both Hagal, Einar’s friend, and Bedugun, the man the Minghan bahadur, Subetei had sent her to find. She had told them where Einar and Subetei were being held and where Pryce could be found. Their plans were in place and just as they had agreed, Bedugun and Hagal had summoned twenty of the strongest fighters among them to the front of the cell block, in plain and ready view as Aulus led Wen along the row.

Bedugun met her gaze evenly, just as Hagal had from his own cell moments earlier. “And him,” Wen said, pointing to Bedugun. “He looks brawny enough. He should make for excellent sport.”

“My lady, you have a keen eye,” Aulus said.

She had picked exactly who they had agreed she would select. Everything was arranged, just as Einar had instructed. She glanced at Aulus and plastered the sweetest smile she could muster onto her face. “You flatter me, Lord Tertius. It is not so hard when you have stocked your carcer with such an abundance of suitable prospects. How many is that now?”

“Those five...and him? That would make twenty, my lady -- twenty each, Enghan and Minghan,” he replied. “Splendid selections each and all, my lady.”

“I hope your friend Iulius will agree,” Wen said, letting Aulus turn her about and lead her toward the carcer exit. She caught sight of Hagal, Einar’s friend as she passed

his cell. She met his eyes for a fleeting moment, and he nodded once at her, a slight and nearly imperceptible gesture.

Aulus laughed, patting his hand against her arm. "My lady, I dare say, he could not have chosen better or more wisely himself," he said.

Wen accompanied Aulus to his suite. She had managed to spend the better part of the morning distracting him, letting him guide her around the palace and offering her inane chatter about the history of the building -- which he could recount only poorly at best -- or himself -- which he could recount with seemingly endless enthusiasm. After they left the carcer, the plans she had made with Einar and Subetei ensconced and in place, unbeknownst to the consul, it was midafternoon. Wen had hoped Aulus would want to spend the rest of the day with his friend, Iulius, but unfortunately, Aulus had other plans in mind.

"I have arranged for a late lunch to be sent to my parlor," he said. They strolled alongside one another along one of the palace's broad corridors, her hand draped genteelly against his proffered elbow. She blinked at him, caught off guard by this and he smiled broadly at her. "If my lady would grace me with your company."

"Of...of course," Wen said, managing a smile. She had forced herself to endure both his company and chatter all morning long, and frankly, was ready to rid herself of both. "I would be pleased, Lord Tertius."

Aulus paused, drawing Wen to a halt along with him. "My lady," he said, awarding her what he no doubt considered to be one of his most disarming smiles. When he reached for her, brushing the cuff of his fingers against her cheek, Wen had to forcibly steel herself against an instinctive recoil. "I would hope that given the measure of our acquaintance, you might feel at ease now abandoning formal address," he said. He lowered his head slightly in a polite nod. "It is Aulus, nothing more." He raised his gaze and his brows hopefully. "We are friends, are we not? At least of a sort."

"We are indeed," Wen said after an uncertain moment. "Alright, then. As you wish, Aulus." He had her in a pinch; she could not refuse to extend the same courteous informality to him without seeming rude. "If that is the case, I...I suppose you could call me Aelwen, if you felt so inclined."

Aulus smiled at her again, his thin lips unfurling in a wry hook that reminded her eerily of a tom cat that had just swallowed a field mouse whole. "Thank you, Aelwen," he said. "As a matter of fact, I do feel so inclined."

He had arranged for a splendid meal. Had the company been different -- and not keeping Wen somewhat nauseous by the proximity -- she might have found it enticing. She let Aulus pull a chair away from the laden table set before the fireplace, offering her a seat. As she lowered herself, her jupes and underlying crinolines ballooning slightly about her hips, the frame of her pannier, Aulus eased the chair politely beneath her. She murmured thanks, watching as he dismissed his servants. He clapped his hands and waved them toward the door.

"I can pour my own wine," he told her with a wink as the last of his valets took their leave. "At least, I was once accustomed to it. My appointment to Kharhorin has seen me spoiled."

"So you keep saying," Wen said, smiling as he lifted a bottle of wine in hand and poured a dollop into the basin of her glass.

"I ordered the bottle opened earlier," he told her, standing expectantly at her elbow, the bottle still poised in his hands. "It has had ample time to breathe, but I will call for another if it does not suit your palate." He smiled. "I am learning the protocol of such things. Time was once, if it was not drawn from a tap, I probably would not have tasted it."

Wen smiled back, trying to be polite. She lifted the glass, drawing it to her mouth. Before she could settle the rim against her lip, she glanced at him and saw him raise his brow.

"Would you not like to savor the bouquet?" he asked. "This is an exquisite vintage, a 1725 Serdican. Eleven hundred dorotus a bottle. I had them imported...a means to remind me of home, I suppose."

Wen forced a smile again. She sniffed loudly and glanced at him again. "It is lovely," she said. She took a sip, swished the wine against her tongue and swallowed it. "Exquisite, indeed."

Aulus beamed, pleased by her approval. He filled her glass with the sweet burgundy wine and then poured one for himself. He sat across from her at the table, cradling the glass against his palm. He leaned forward, lifting his wine in a toast. "To new friendships," he said. "And my lady's keen eye for circus combatants."

"*Slainte*," Wen murmured, tapping her glass against his. She took a long swallow of wine. She could see covered dishes, silver platters lining a nearby buffet. *Must be at least seven courses waiting for me*, she thought glumly. *With Aulus yapping all the while. Hoah, it is going to be a long afternoon*. She took another swig of wine.

"*Slainte*," Aulus said. "I am not familiar with that term."

"It is Gaeilgen," Wen said, drawing her fingertips to her lips as she uttered a soft, fruit-flavored belch. "It means *to your health*."

"A toast from Tiralainn," he remarked.

"Yes," Wen said, nodding. She met his gaze over the top of her glass as she downed another mouthful of wine. "My home, Aulus."

He smiled at her, his brow arched somewhat, but said nothing.

The wine helped. The meal dragged on in Wen's point of view, with Aulus taking his time in serving each course. She picked at the food and listened to his droning conversation without any real interest, adding in smiles or murmured reply when it seemed appropriate. Whenever her wine glass wavered at the half-filled mark, he would rise and fill it again for her. She had no idea how much she swallowed, but it made the passage of time bearable. The wine was strong. It quickly left her head swimming contentedly, her body filled with comfortable, lazy warmth. It tugged at her eyelids, drooping them heavily, and made her smiles come more readily, her laughter more naturally. *Aulus is nearly tolerable if you are half-cocked*, she thought, making herself giggle.

After more than an hour, however, the gentle nudge of the wine became dizzying. Wen found herself blinking dazedly across the table, watching Aulus' mouth flap open and closed, his words running together in an undecipherable blur of sounds. She propped her chin in the cup of her hand, resting her elbow on the table -- the height of poor manners, she knew, but unavoidable, given she felt she might otherwise

crumple face-first into her pickled pheasant. Her arms and legs felt heavy, numb and unwieldy, her fingers turned into spindly oak twigs. It might have only been her imagination, but she could have sworn that she could hear the coursing rush of her blood, surging with each heartbeat behind her ears. The warmth that had at first felt comfortable and cozy all at once seemed suffocating.

“Are you alright, Aelwen?” Aulus asked, as her chin began to droop, her eyelids fluttering closed. His voice came from fathoms away, a hint of discernable words, and she lifted her gaze, blinking at him again.

“Huh?” she asked. Her mouth felt tacky and dry, as if she had crammed her cheeks full of cotton gauze.

Aulus smiled at her, the bleary image of his face side-slipping in her view. “Are you alright?” he asked again.

“I...I do not feel...” she murmured, brushing her fingertips clumsily against her face. “I do not feel well.”

He raised his brow. “What is wrong? Is the food not to your liking? I could...”

He continued on, but his words slurred together. Wen pushed her chair back as she stumbled to her feet. She jostled the table as she stood, sending her glass toppling onto its side, spilling her wine in a broad, blood-colored stain against the stark linen tablecloth. She blinked at the spill. “Hoah,” she said, reeling unsteadily on her feet. She reached for her napkin, meaning to wipe it up. “I...I am sorry, Lord Tertius. I do not know...what...what has come over me.”

Aulus rose, walking swiftly to her side. He put his arm around her waist and caught her wrist gently with the other. “It is Aulus, remember?” he asked as she looked up at him. “Nothing more. Do not worry for that. I will summon a valet to mop it up.”

“I am sorry,” she whispered. She pulled away from him, and he let her go. He watched her stumble toward the fireplace. She leaned heavily against the mantle, pressing her hand against her head. The heat of the room was overwhelming now, and she gasped quietly for breath, her head awlirl. *What is the matter with me?* she thought, alarmed. *I have outdone Odhran before matching pint for pint in portar -- why has the wine affected me so?*

“Would you like to lie down awhile, Aelwen?” Aulus asked. His footsteps seemed to echo in her mind, each click of his shoe heels against the floor reverberating in thunderous refrain through her skull.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “No, I...I want to...to go back to my room, please. I want...”

She watched Aulus reach beneath the flap of his justicoat lapel, dipping his hand into an interior pocket. He pulled something out, a small vial, and pulled loose the porcelain cap. She stumbled back, her brows pinched in bewilderment as he drew the opened vial to his nose. He pinched one nostril closed and then tilted his head back, inhaling deeply, snorting whatever was inside the vial up his other nostril.

“What are you doing?” she asked, frowning. He lowered his face, blinking owlishly, gasping slightly for breath.

“Hoah,” he whispered, giving his head a little shake. “Just some serekeum, my lady,” he told her with a smile. “A little present from the Khahl and their dragons. You have already enjoyed some today for yourself.”

He did something, she thought in dismay. Aulus put something to the wine...serekeum, did he say? He...he has tricked me! Wen turned and looked around the room. It listed crazily about her, as if it had been transplanted to the main deck of a frigate caught in a gale. She could not steady her gaze enough to find the door. She stumbled forward, her hands outstretched as she tried to make her way through this murky, swimming landscape. “What...what have you done?” she asked as her hands slapped against a wall, the carved wood of a doorframe. She stepped across the threshold, leaning heavily against the wall, her feet tripping clumsily against the hems of her long skirts. “What did you...do to me...?”

“It is alright,” he said. She watched him shrug his way out of his justicoat, letting it fall to the floor. He lifted his chin, pulling his cravat loose from his shirt, unwrapping the ruffled folds.

“Stay away from me,” Wen whispered. She staggered clumsily, unsteadily.

“Alas, I cannot,” he told her, feigning an apologetic smile as he unbuttoned his waist coat. He drew the long doublet from his shoulders, discarding it against the floor.

She watched him unfasten his cufflinks from his sleeves. "Not now. Not any longer. I have been waiting for this, Aelwen, and patiently at that. I will not wait any longer."

He pulled his shirt tails from his breeches, letting them drape about his hips. He walked toward her without saying a word, and she shied back, frightened.

"Stay back...!" she whimpered, and he seized her by the face. He forced her backward, walking toward the bed. "Stop it," she said, and he kissed her mouth, stifling her protests with his tongue. His hand moved against her breast, his fingers closing, groping against her, and he moaned softly against her mouth.

"You are so beautiful," he whispered, his lips hovering above hers. The back of her knees struck the bed, her skirts crumpling beneath her.

"Stop it!" she begged, slapping her hands against him. There was no strength in her arms, her hands, and he laughed as he leaned over her. "Please...please do not...!" Wen pleaded, trying to push him away. He eased her down against the mattress, and her head whirled again, a violent spell of vertigo.

He leaned over her, kissing her neck, her ear as he pressed himself against her, pinning her against the bed. "I have wanted this for so long," he breathed into her ear. He gave her stomach a sharp jerk, opening the back of it, and then his hand set to work on her underlying corset. "I have wanted you for so long."

"Stop..." she whimpered, trying vainly to squirm beneath him. Somehow the cords between her brain and her limbs had come unfettered -- like her underpinnings -- and she could not seem to will her arms and legs into motion. "Please...please do not..."

"Your husband is dead," Aulus whispered, leaning over her. "And it would be a crime to let this lovely, delicious form wither in his absence. Not when I could make such sweet use of it." She felt his hand close against her breast, kneading, and she whimpered in revulsion and helpless fright.

"Please..." she whispered.

"Oh, I mean to," Aulus said, and he jerked at her skirts, hiking them to her hips, running his hands up her thighs, easing them apart beneath him. "I mean to please you, Aelwen."

He lowered himself atop her, uttering a guttural, groaning sound and Wen closed her eyes. *This is not happening...!* her mind hiccupped. She turned her face toward her shoulder, trembling as he moaned and grunted, shifting his weight against her. *No, please...this cannot be happening to me...!*

Pryce heard scuffling footsteps and the sharp, shrill cry of a child's voice through the narrow ventilation opening in the floor of his cell. He lay on his side facing the small hole; he had not moved from this place since Wen had come to him and left again. He remained there, his face close to the opening, his mind replaying the sound of her voice comforting him in the darkness over and over again. He had lapsed into restless unconsciousness, dreaming of her, and when he heard the clamor, the tremulous, frightened cry, his eyes flew open wide.

"Wen," he whispered, groaning softly as he pressed his hand against the floor and tried to lift his head. He was groggy and disoriented, and he blinked against the darkness, trying to gather his bearings. He could see a dim stripe of orange glow ahead of him, faint torchlight from the cell next to his.

"...damn bloody wild cat..." he heard a man's voice say from the adjacent cell. "Here, you little rot..."

There was another scuffling sound, a rustling thud as if something small and lightweight fell against the ground near the opening. Pryce heard a child's voice hiccup softly for hysterical breath, a quiet, tearful mewling.

Coinin. He heard the resounding boom of an iron door slamming shut, and the momentary glow of torchlight disappeared. Pryce reached through the opening in the wall, hooking his fingertips through the narrow space. "Coinin!" he called softly, hoarsely.

She was weeping. He could hear the sounds of her fluttering sobs, and it frightened him. He felt her little fingers paw against his, groping for him, clutching at him. She did not say anything; she only cried all the more as she felt his hands, pressed her round, tear-dampened cheek against his fingertips.

“Coinin,” he said softly, gently, moving his hand, offering her a caress. She shuddered against him, mewling again, breaking his heart. “Please, lass,” he whispered. “Please do not cry. I am here. It is Pryce, lass. It is alright.”

He did not know what time it was. He did not realize it was far too early for Coinin to have been returned to her cell for the night. He only knew she was inconsolable. Something had happened to terrify and disturb her. “Are you hurt?” he asked. “Coinin, did someone hurt you?”

She shook her head against his hand. He felt her soft curls brush against his fingers as she moved. “Pryce...” she whimpered, clinging to his hand.

“I am here,” he said gently. “I am right here, lass. Do not be frightened.”

“Pryce,” Coinin whispered, tucking her face against his fingers, wedging her own through the opening to fumble against the cuff of his shackles.

“Did someone hurt you, Coinin?”

She shook her head again and he realized. His breath drew still, and his eyes widened in dismay. “Did someone hurt Wen?”

Coinin nodded, mewling again. Pryce could not breathe. He felt his stomach knot abruptly, painfully, twisting its way toward his sternum, and he could not force air past the tangle.

“Who?” Pryce asked, his voice strained. “Who hurt Wen?” He inched forward until his forehead pressed against the clammy stone wall, and he gasped softly, anguished. He knew the answer; he knew even without struggling to summon the words.

“The man,” Coinin said. “The man with the white hair.”

Aulus Tertius, he thought, his brows furrowing, his shoulders trembling with sudden, helpless rage. *That bastard. That bloody rot damn bastard.*

Aulus Tertius wore the powdered wigs of a fashionable nobleman. To a child who did not understand such things as aristocratic style, the tailed hairpieces would make a person look like they had white hair.

“He is hurting her,” Coinin whimpered. “She was crying. I peeped through the keyhole and saw her on the bed. He...he had ripped her pretty dress.”

Oh, Mother Above, no, Pryce thought, anguished. *No, please...please...!*

He slipped his hand away from hers, drawing his fingers back through the opening. He shoved his palms against the ground and sat up, turning his face in the darkness toward his cell door. "No, no, no!" he cried, shaking with fury and anguish. "Leave her alone! Wen! Wen!"

He stumbled to his feet, reeling. He shambled about in the darkness, his bound hands outstretched until he found the iron door. He staggered back and then threw himself at it, ramming his shoulder against it with all of his might, crying out in rage. "Leave her alone!" he screamed. "Whatever you want -- I am here! I am right bloody here!"

He charged the door again and again, beating at it with his fists, battering at it with his shoulders and hips. "Hurt me instead, Aulus Tertius, you bastard! Hurt me! I am here -- hurt me instead! Leave her alone!"

At last, exhausted and stunned, he crumpled to his knees, his tears spilling, his body shuddering with sobs. He threw his head back, lifting his face toward the ceiling. "Wen!" he shrieked. "Wen! No, no! Wen!"

He screamed her name until his voice cracked. He tangled his fingers in his hair and shoved the heels of his hands against his brow, weeping. "Hurt me instead!" he cried. "Please...not Wen. Hurt me instead. Whatever you want. What...whatever you want, I...I beg you...I beg you...!"

He could hear Coinin sobbing in the darkness. He lowered his hands from his face, turning toward the sound. "I...I am sorry," Coinin whimpered, her voice choked with tears, her breath hitching in fluttering hiccups. "Please, Pryce, I...I am sorry."

He crawled toward her, patting his hands along the base of the wall until he found the opening between their cells. Her hands were forced through the hole, straining for him, and he curled his fingers against hers, holding her. "It is not your fault," he whispered. He leaned over, pressing his lips against the little girl's hands as his own tears continued to spill. "Hoah, lass, please do not cry. It is not your fault."

They huddled together in the darkness, clutching at one another. Coinin was inconsolable; Pryce's grief and rage had only upset her all the more. He spoke softly to her, whispering gently to her, trying to comfort her. The softness in his voice did not

extend to his heart, however, and he pressed his cheek against the wall, his brows furrowed, his shoulders trembling.

“It is alright,” he whispered to Coinin. “Hush now, lass, it will all be alright.”

Chapter Fourteen

“Praetorius Paulus -- punctual as always,” Aulus declared the next morning as Faustus ushered Decimus into the parlor of the consul’s suite. Aulus met Decimus’ gaze, a broad and insincere smile plastered on his face. “By my boot heels, man, have you any faults?”

“Insufferable tolerance, my lord,” Decimus said quietly, almost beneath his breath as he lowered his eyes politely to his boots.

Aulus stood before him wearing only a pair of underbreeches cinched loosely about his waist and a colorful silk dressing robe unfettered about his torso. He was barefooted and in need of a shave. His tawny hair was disheveled, as though he had just roused from his bed. He had the glassy-eyed, eagerly manic gaze of a man who had spent the night in revelry and portar, only to have awoken the next morning yet drunk from his endeavors.

Aulus strode toward him, opening his arms as if he meant to hug Decimus. Instead, he clapped his hands affably against Decimus’ shoulders. “You remember my Lady Aelwen, do you not, Decimus?” he asked, turning Decimus slightly to a small table arranged by the fireplace. Breakfast had been laid out here, an elaborate spread of boiled eggs, toasted breads and dried fruits, all of it seemingly untouched on porcelain plates and silver serving platters. Aelwen Fainne-Finamur sat at one side of the table. She was so motionless and quiet, Decimus might not have taken notice of her had Aulus not directed his gaze.

Like Aulus, she looked as though she had just roused from bed, although to judge by her appearance, she had enjoyed precious little if any rest during her tenure there. Heavy shadows encircled her large eyes, and her dark, tousled hair hung about her face in a tangled disarray. She looked haggard and haunted, as though when she looked at him, she did not see him at all; she gazed right through him. She wore a white linen nightdress with a lace-trimmed dressing gown tied over it. Her hands lay limp against her lap. She reminded Aulus in posture and mannerism of a life-sized doll, a marionette someone had propped in a corner, its strings slackened and untended.

"My lady," Decimus said, pressing his fingertips against the breast of his uniform justicoat and bowing. "What an unexpected but delightful pleasure."

Aelwen said nothing in reply.

"Faustus, I would like you to summon a jeweler from the city to pay call this morning," Aulus said to his steward, clapping his hands sharply. He began to pace about the chamber briskly, the hem of his robe flapping and fluttering about his hips and thighs. "I want him to bring his finest assortment of gems and stones -- all of them here to the palace, and to my lady. Dress ornaments, chatelaines, rings, necklaces -- I want only his best and most extravagant awaiting my lady's return this afternoon."

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said quietly, addressing the toes of his shoes.

"Return?" Decimus asked.

"My lady and I have a standing appointment at the arena today, do we not, Aelwen?" Aulus asked. Where Decimus found Aelwen's vacant stare, her lack of reply disturbing, Aulus seemed unbothered. In fact, as peculiar as Aelwen's behavior was, Decimus found Aulus' all the more so -- he became all the more convinced with every word, every brisk, nearly stumbling swagger, that the consul was either drunk, despite the early hour, or somehow likewise inebriated.

"We are going to the circus," Aulus said, coming to stand behind Aelwen, draping his hands against her shoulders. He trailed his fingertips lightly through her tousled hair as if the texture against his skin fascinated him. After a moment of seeming distraction at this, he blinked, emerging from his reverie, and smiled at Decimus. "We are to meet Iulius at the arena promptly at eleven. Faustus -- summon my lady's handmaids to my chamber. Have a bath prepared for her. She will want to refresh herself after breakfast."

"Yes, my lord," Faustus said.

"Splendid," Aulus said. "And have her belongings -- her clothing, jewels, shoes -- all of it moved to my suite. She will be keeping here with me from now on."

Faustus nodded again. "Yes, my lord."

"Would you like to join us, Decimus?" Aulus asked. When Decimus looked somewhat puzzled, Aulus' brows crimped slightly in aggravation. "The circus. Eleven o'clock. Would you care to come? It is a spacious suite, the imperial box, and a splendid view. My lady has hand-selected forty combatants to stand in the ring against one

another today in what will surely make for a magnificent match -- twenty Enghan and twenty Khahl."

He offered this last bit in a friendly enough tone, but Decimus recognized a provocation when he heard it. Aulus knew he disapproved of any mistreatment of the Enghan boys, as it went not only against the signed agreement they had bartered with the Herr, but with established rules and protocols within the empire as to the treatment of prisoners.

"I think I shall pass, my lord," Decimus said, smiling politely. "Such blood sport has never instilled much enthusiasm within me."

The corner of Aulus' mouth hooked wryly as he brushed the cuff of his fingers against Aelwen's cheek. "That is a shame," he murmured. "It has certainly stoked a passion within my lady." He glanced at Decimus and dropped him a wink. "As I can personally attest to."

Aelwen turned her face away from his hand, her lips pressed together, her brows pinching slightly, nearly imperceptibly.

"My lord, you offer more information than is polite for common knowledge," Decimus told Aulus, meeting the consul's gaze, and not missing the furrow that cleaved between Aulus' brows at the courteous -- but thinly veiled -- rebuke.

"You men of Troia," Aulus said with a snort. He walked away from Aelwen, pacing the chamber again. "Milksofs, we call you in Serdica. Soft and yet unweaned from your mother's teats."

"I should like to think of us as gentlemen of reason and civility, Lord Tertius," Decimus said, keeping his own brows uncrimped, his tone of voice pleasant. "As all in the empire should aspire to be."

Two of his commanding officers, Seius and Appenius, arrived at the suite, accompanied by six other bellatori and announcing themselves with a brief tap against the parlor door. As he caught sight of them, Aulus cried out as if they were long lost friends. "Hoah! Splendid, then!" he exclaimed, clapping his hands again. He waved at them in beckon. "Come in, lads -- come in! We have been waiting for you!"

The soldiers stepped inside, drawing in tow the young man whom Decimus knew only pretended to be Einar Eirikson. He was nearly unrecognizable to Decimus from

their initial introduction; his hair was filthy and askew in a matted mess, his chin and cheeks hidden beneath a short, disheveled beard. He had lost at least fifteen pounds he could ill afford from his lean frame. The young man stumbled between his captors as he entered the parlor. He blinked dazedly at Decimus and then over the Praetorius' shoulder at the girl. When his gaze settled on Aelwen, his brows lifted, his expression twisting as though a knife had just been shoved into his breast, the blade buried nearly to the hilt. He staggered, his knees failing him, his voice escaping in a soft, anguished moan. It was a quiet word, indistinguishable to the others, but one Decimus recognized. "Wen...!" the young man said.

Decimus turned as the bellatori jerked the young man upright again. He looked at the girl; Aelwen, too, looked as though she had just suffered some brutal injury. The impassivity had drained in her face, and she blinked, stricken at the young man, her dark eyes flooded with tears, her lips trembling. Her hands fluttered toward her bosom, her fingers dancing against the neckline of her gown. She whimpered something, a sound so soft, it went unnoticed by any save Decimus, who saw her lips move more than he distinguished the sound. To his gaze, it looked as though she uttered a name: *Pryce*.

The young man swung his gaze to Aulus and his face twisted, his brows furrowing, his hands folding into fists. "You bastard," he hissed, and he lunged between his captors, rushing at Aulus. Aulus yelped, backpedaling clumsily, his eyes flown wide as the young man swung his fists, clipping his knuckles against the consul's mouth, drawing blood. The bellatori seized the young man roughly as he swung again, hauling him back before his fists found their mark a second time. He thrashed between them, shrugging his shoulders, mustering both strength and ferocity Decimus would have long thought starved or beaten from his form.

"Bastard!" he screamed at Aulus, struggling wildly. "You rotted bastard! I will kill you, Tertius! I will rip your heart from your breast, you bloody rot, and I will cram it up your ass, you --!"

One of the bellatori drove his elbow into the boy's gut, whooping the breath from him. He staggered, choking for air, his knees buckling.

"No!" Aelwen cried out softly, her hands slapping against a tea cup as they darted for her mouth. The cup tipped over and tumbled from the table, shattering against the ground, spraying broken porcelain shards and tea in all directions.

The guards jerked the young man to his feet again. He glared at Aulus, his face flushed, his eyes blazing. "Bastard!" he gasped.

"Hoah!" Aulus exclaimed, startled and unnerved by the seemingly unprovoked attack. He brushed his fingertips against his lips and stared in stunned wonder at the blood spotted against his hand. He laughed shakily, shrilly, blinking at Decimus with wide, surprised eyes. "He has some spirit left within him yet!"

"He is a man, not a mule, my lord," Decimus told him. "Perhaps one does not break as easily as the other."

"Perhaps," Aulus said, nodding, still trembling with shock. He backed deliberately away from the young man, eying him warily, as one might a dog caught on a short tether, with a penchant for snapping. He dabbed his fingers against his mouth again and glanced at Decimus. "Cut his throat."

Decimus blinked at him. "My lord?"

Aelwen uttered a soft, stricken whimper. "No!"

Aulus looked at the blood on his fingertips again and then his brows drew narrow, the uncertainty in his face fading. "Cut his throat," he said again, glaring at the young man. "He hit me. You all saw it. He dared to raise his hand against a consul of the empire. That is as an offense against the Pater Patriae himself."

"Lord Tertius, we have the signed surrender of the Herr," Decimus said, and the consul turned to him, his eyes flown wide in surprise. "By the terms of that agreement -- to which we are bound, my lord -- the boy is to be released to his people."

"I know what the terms are, Praetorius," Aulus said, frowning. "The surrender is signed and in hand and underway as we speak. Engjold is mine, and Einar Eirikson is of no more use to me."

"Engjold surrendered to the empire, Lord Tertius, not you," Decimus said. "Einar Eirikson is an imperial prisoner -- not yours."

“We are at war, Praetorius Paulus,” Aulus said in a tight, clipped voice that suggested he struggled to maintain a pleasant tone. “In those circumstances, as the consul, I am the empire.”

The two men locked gazes, facing one another, neither averting their eyes. They stared at one another for a long, silent moment and the air within the parlor suddenly grew very heavy.

“To disobey me is treason, Praetorius,” Aulus said quietly, his brows furrowed.

“To disobey written order from the Pater and Senate is treason, Lord Tertius,” Decimus said.

“I have authority here,” Aulus said. “I am the Pater and Senate in Ulus.”

Decimus said nothing, keeping his eyes fixed on the consul.

“You told me once that you do your duty to your Pater and the empire -- whether you wish it, will it, want it or not,” Aulus said. “That is your job, Praetorius. I am giving you an order. You will see it through or you will be run through for treason against the empire. Do you understand?”

Decimus did not answer. He settled his jaw at a stern angle, locking his back teeth together, letting his brows draw in a slight furrow.

Aulus stepped toward him. “I said, do you understand, Praetorius Paulus?”

Decimus nodded once. “Yes, my lord.”

Aulus cocked his brow. “Good,” he said. “Then there is no more confusion. Cut his throat.”

Decimus walked toward the boy, reaching for his belt, where he kept his dagger sheathed. The young man struggled between the bellatori at his approach, his brows furrowed deeply, defiantly. From behind Decimus, he could hear quiet, whimpering sounds as Aelwen began to cry. “No,” she said softly. “No, please...Pryce...”

Decimus met the young man’s eyes, and the boy glared back at him, lifting his chin, mustering whatever pride he called his own. He did not avert his gaze or look toward the knife. It was instinctive for someone to glance at an approaching knife, to stare at a blade raised against them in threat, and yet the young man did not as much as flinch. He fell still, his squirming subsiding, and he held Decimus’ gaze balefully, boldly.

“Do it, Praetorius,” Aulus snapped. He flapped his hand at one of the soldiers. “Grab his hair -- force his head back.”

The bellatorus obeyed, closing his fist in the young man’s blond hair, jerking his head back to expose his throat. The boy craned his face, straining to keep his gaze locked with Decimus’. Decimus let the dagger hilt spin against his palm as he shifted his grip; sunlight flashed as the blade swung in a swift arc, but still the young man did not turn his eyes.

“No!” Aelwen screamed. She leapt from her chair, a broken marionette no longer, and rushed across the room. Aulus pivoted, surprised by her cry, and as she tried to dart past him, he grabbed her roughly about the waist, jerking her backward off her feet. She thrashed against him, kicking her legs wildly, balling her hands into fists and pummeling against his arms. Her hair flew in her face in a tangled mess and she screamed shrilly, cursing him. “You bastard!” she shrieked. “Let him go! You lying rot damn coward bastard! Leave him alone! Pryce! Pryce!”

“Rotted bitch!” Aulus shouted, and he threw her mightily, sending her stumbling, crashing into the table. She fell, toppling the table and its carefully arranged placements of trays and platters. Porcelain shattered and silver clanged as they smacked against the floor or beneath Aelwen’s weight as the table collapsed. Tea spilled everywhere; fruit and eggs went rolling, tumbling across the granite tiles.

“Wen!” the young man screamed, and he fought again, struggling fiercely between his captors. “Wen -- no -- !”

Aelwen shoved her hands beneath her and raised her head, her brows furrowed, her dark eyes blazing with murderous fury as she glared at Aulus. “You bastard!” she cried hoarsely, and she scrambled to her feet, charging him again. She had snatched up a knife from the fallen breakfast table and brandished it in her fist, driving the blade for his gut.

He caught her wrist and grappled with her. The knife fell from her hand as Aulus craned her arm at a sharp, painful angle, and as her knees buckled and she cried out, he closed his hand into a fist, sending his knuckles careening into her cheek. Aelwen crumpled to the floor, her gown billowing about her in graceful folds.

“Wen!” the young man screamed again, thrashing between the soldiers. “I will kill you!” he shrieked at Aulus. “I will bloody kill you -- do not touch her! Fight me, you bastard! Fight me!”

“Rot damn bitch,” Aulus hissed, staring down at Aelwen. He punted her mightily in the gut, and the young man behind him bellowed in new fury. Aelwen huddled against the ground, whimpering and gasping for breath, her arms folded against her belly.

Aulus whirled toward Decimus and the bellatori. “Were you all just going to stand there while this damn bitch ran me through?” he cried. He kicked Aelwen in the stomach again, *whoofing* what precious little breath she had left from her. “She had a rot damn knife! She meant to stick me with it and here you all stand, like it is a bloody damn event at the circus!”

“Leave her alone!” the young man screamed at Aulus, lunging against his captors. “You want to kick someone, kick me, you bastard! Stand against me instead! I am here, Tertius -- I am right bloody here!”

Aulus blinked at him, and then at Decimus, bewildered. “What is he screaming about?” he asked. “Why does he bloody rot care what I do to this bitch? She was his prisoner, not his bride. She...”

His voice faded, and his eyes widened in sudden, horrified realization. He blinked at the young man and then down at Aelwen as she struggled to move, to lift her head from the floor. “Hoah...” he whispered. He turned to Decimus, his face ashen. “Cut...cut his throat.”

“No!” Aelwen gasped, reaching out, pawing against Aulus’ leg.

“Cut his throat,” Aulus said again, kicking at her, knocking her away from him. He strode toward Decimus, his expression shifting from shock to rage, and he closed his hands into trembling fists. “Cut his bloody damn throat, Decimus. Do it now.”

“You bastard,” the young man hissed at Aulus. “You rot bastard.”

“Cut his throat!” Aulus shouted. “Have you gone deaf, Praetorius? I gave you an order -- you will see it through! Give me that blade! I do not need you, you bloody damn coward. Give it to me -- I will cut him myself!”

He reached out, snatching for Decimus’ dagger. Decimus pivoted, closing his hand against the consul’s wrist, clamping hard enough to wipe the fury momentarily

from Aulus' face, to still his breath in his throat and draw him to a clumsy, stumbling halt. Aulus blinked at Decimus, startled, and Decimus leaned toward him, frowning.

"Remove your hand from me, Lord Tertius," Decimus said, and he shoved against Aulus, sending him staggering backward. He floundered, his eyes flown wide, and then he fell onto his rump, his legs sprawling skyward.

Aulus stared up at Decimus in shocked outrage. "You..." he whispered. "You bastard!" He struggled to rise, staggering clumsily to his feet. His face flushed with bright color. "You bastard!" he cried. "How dare you touch me! How dare you disobey me! I am the bloody damn consul! I am the tribunicia potestate! I am the empire to you, you rot bastard!" He whirled toward the bellatori. "Disarm this man and arrest him!" he shouted, pointing at Decimus. "Disarm him right now -- right this rot damn minute!"

The soldiers did not move. They looked at Aulus, their faces frozen in stoic impassivity. Aulus sputtered, stumbling about, blinking at each of them in turn. "I said arrest this man!" he screamed, spittle flying from his lips. "You will do as you are told or I will see the damn lot of you strung up from the gallows for treason! I have authority here! I speak for the Pater here -- my word is the law, and you will arrest this man!"

"The Pater is dead," Decimus said, and Aulus whirled, his eyes flying wide. "I received word from Cneas this morning. There was an incident at the Senate, a group of assassins attacked on the open floor while the Pater heard pardons. He is dead."

Aulus stared at him. "You are lying."

Decimus shrugged slightly. He reached beneath his justicoat lapel, withdrawing a folded parchment from his pocket. He tossed it to Aulus. "See for yourself, my lord."

Aulus unfolded the page, his hands shaking. He looked down at the parchment, reading, and after a moment, he blinked up at Decimus, stricken. "...I have received no word of this," he whispered.

"I know," Decimus replied. "I burned your copy."

Aulus gawked at him, dumbstruck.

"You speak for the Pater here," Decimus said. "But the Pater is gone. The Senate -- the whole of the empire -- grew tired of his insatiable, illogical greed. He taxed the resources of his army and his people pursuing new lands while neglecting those he had already claimed."

“He was building the empire,” Aulus whispered. “He...he was...”

“He was *destroying* the empire,” Decimus said. “And now he has been stopped.” He nodded toward the parchment. “We will honor the terms of the surrender. The lands and people of Engjold will be returned to them once we have what we have been promised, and then we will pull our forces in full from that misbegotten plot of tundra and forget about them. Our directive, Lord Tertius -- the imperative that has been imparted to imperial representatives in Kharhorin -- is to make this entire, ugly, unfortunate incident -- these past ten years wasted and squandered -- disappear.”

“Directive?” Aulus said. “By whose authority?”

“By the Senate’s,” Decimus replied. “And the new imperial Consulate they have appointed in the Pater’s place. Priam Homullus.”

Aulus’ eyes widened and Decimus arched his brow. “Yes,” he said. “Another Troian...milksoop, did you say? He has ordered us to make this disappear. And, I am afraid, you along with it.”

Aulus staggered back. “What?”

Decimus cut his eyes to his guards, and without another word, they moved forward, converging upon the consul, drawing their swords. “What...?” Aulus began, his voice hiccupping with bewildered alarm as he stumbled back from their approach. He glanced at Decimus, his eyes wide. “What are you...?”

They did not award him another breath. The bellatori fell upon him, blades in hand, and the consul’s words dissolved into sharp, agonized shrieks. When at last the soldiers stepped away, their swords dripping and stained with scarlet, Aulus Tertius lay in a heap against the floor, a spread of blood widening about him against the polished tiles. His eyes were open, rolling in their sockets, his mouth agape and ringed with bloody froth. “You...” he croaked at Decimus, his bloody fingertips scrabbling feebly against the floor. His voice failed him, trailing off into a gurgling wheeze and then he fell still, unblinking.

Aulus Tertius was dead, run through by his own soldiers. There was an irony that Pryce might have otherwise appreciated had he not wanted to be the one to kill the son of a bitch himself. In the aftermath, as the consul’s blood pooled on the floor, Pryce

found himself standing alone, unrestrained by his captors, and he darted forward, rushing to Wen.

“Pryce!” she cried, choking against a sudden, anguished sob. She was kneeling on the floor, shuddering.

He ran to her, falling to his knees. “Wen,” he whispered, touching her face, cradling her cheek against his palm. “Wen...”

They held one another, tucked together, trembling. “He hurt you,” Pryce whispered, stricken. He gasped softly, lowering his face to her shoulder. “He hurt you...!”

“I am sorry,” Wen said. “Pryce, please...I...I am sorry...”

He shook his head, taking her face between his hands, pressing his forehead against hers. “Do not say that. It is not your fault. It is not your fault, Wen.”

“I love you,” she breathed.

He let the tip of his nose brush against hers gently. “Hoah, I love you, too.”

He felt heavy hands fall against his shoulders, startling him, and then Wen cried out as one of the bellatori grabbed her. “Pryce!”

“Wen!” Pryce shouted, struggling as a pair of soldiers hauled him roughly to his feet. Another pair were drawing Wen away from him, dragging her back, and she stared at him, her eyes enormous with fear. “Wen!” Pryce yelled again, thrashing, swinging his fists and fighting to get loose of the soldiers. “Let her go! Bastards! Get your hands off her!”

He jerked his head toward Decimus Paulus, drawing in a sharp breath to rail against the man. He blinked, startled to realize more bellatori had come to be in the parlor; suddenly, there were more than a dozen soldiers standing behind him. They met in apparent urgent counsel with their Praetorius to judge by their drawn weapons and donned helmets -- not to mention the expressions of anxious alarm plastered on their faces.

Decimus turned to Wen, studying her for a long moment. “Clever,” he remarked. “Twenty Enghan, and twenty Khahl. Very clever indeed, lass.”

He nodded toward one of his soldiers. “Kill them both,” he said, and Pryce’s eyes flew wide.

“No!” he screamed, thrashing against his captors. “No -- you cannot! No!”

Decimus glanced at him. “Your lady has made some arrangements, it seems,” he said. “Your Enghan friends have revolted. The ones she chose for the circus today turned their combat weapons instead against my bellatori. They have managed to ally themselves with the former palace guards under the Kagan -- Minghan warriors, and together, they have liberated my carcer. They are storming the lower levels of the palace as we speak.” He turned to Faustus; the steward had shied away into a corner of the parlor, his face ashen with shock at the horrors he had just witnessed, his eyes enormous. “And why do I think my lady was not alone in her efforts?”

“Faustus...!” Wen whimpered.

Faustus blinked at Decimus, stricken. He whirled about and tried to run, making a mad dash for the parlor door. Two bellatori seized him roughly, dragging him kicking and squirming back into the room.

“Faustus, have shame,” Decimus told him, and Faustus drew still, trembling with terror.

“Please!” he said, trying to hold his hands up in implore. “Please, my lord, I...I swear to you, I...I...”

“He had nothing to do with this!” Wen cried out. “Leave him alone!”

Decimus spared her a glance. “My lady, you are a dreadful liar.” He looked at Faustus again. “A bastard for a master is a master still the same. You know what happens to slaves who betray their masters, do you not, Faustus? The penalty is harsh -- but it is the law.”

Faustus stared at him, frightened. “Please,” he whispered.

“Leave him alone,” Pryce said, straining against the soldiers’ grasps. “Please do not hurt him or hurt Wen. Do whatever you want to me -- anything -- but do not hurt them. I beg you.”

“Pryce, no,” Wen cried, and Pryce looked at her. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head, new tears swimming in her eyes.

“Please,” Pryce said, turning to Decimus again. “I beg you.”

Decimus walked toward him. The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “The mettle of a king in the guise of a boy,” he murmured. “I imagine you are a fine officer in your

realm's Navy, Lieutenant Finamur. You are perhaps the most extraordinary young man I have ever met."

"Please do not do this," Pryce said, struggling. "You do not want to. I know you do not. Please...!"

"No, I do not want to do this," Decimus said, and he turned again, walking toward the door. "But I have my orders and what I want is irrelevant. Lord Tertius was right about that." He motioned to his guards. "You six keep here. Kill the lot of them and then head to the lower levels when you are finished -- fortify this palace. The rest of you are with me."

"Wen, no!" Pryce screamed, thrashing and kicking his legs as two bellatori began to drag him out of the parlor toward an antechamber at the left of the suite.

"Pryce!" Wen cried, struggling as another pair of bellatori began to haul her into the bedchamber. "Pryce, no! No, please!" She fought with the guards, balling her hands into desperate fists and swinging wildly. One of them caught her roughly around the waist, hoisting her from her feet, carrying her.

"Let her go!" Pryce screamed, and then the antechamber door slammed in front of him. She could hear his frantic cries from beyond the wood, muffled and shrill. "Wen! Wen!"

The bellatori dragged Wen and Faustus into the bedchamber. Once inside, with the door closed behind them, the soldier holding Wen set her down on the ground again, loosening his grasp somewhat. Wen rammed her elbow back into his gut, *whoofing* the breath from him. As he stumbled, his arm slipping from her waist, she wrenched herself free and darted for the far corner.

"It seems a shame, does it not?" another soldier asked as Wen pressed herself against the wall. She whirled around, staring at them, her heart hammering beneath her breast with panicked fright.

"What?" asked the first bellatorus somewhat breathlessly, as he rubbed his palm against the spot in his belly where Wen's elbow had struck him.

The second soldier nodded at Wen, and then glanced among his fellows. "Killing such a sweet young poppet so swiftly, so soon. It is a shame, that is all. A waste, do you not think?"

"Hoah, it has been some time since I had a taste of something sweet and imperial," said one of the guards holding Faustus. The steward blinked at Wen, his eyes enormous with horrified realization. "She is dark-skinned like a Median, true, but she speaks the empire's tongue at least. These squinty-eyed Khahl whores do not. It is a rot damn way to wither a man, you know, a woman purring at you in that jibberish of theirs."

"Get it out of your heads, lad," growled the fourth. "You heard the Praetorius. He gave us orders."

"Oh, bugger the Praetorius, Fenius," said one of the others.

"You bugger him, Tadius," laughed another, letting his eyes crawl slowly, deliberately down the length of Wen's form. "I have something a little sweeter in mind."

"Besides, how is he going to bloody know?" snapped the first, glowering at him. "We all take a turn, quick-like, and then we cut her throat. No one is the wiser."

"She is a married woman," the fourth one said.

"Not anymore," said another, with a wink. "Five more minutes across the way, at the most, I say, and she will be a widow."

Wen stared at them in horror, shied against the wall. One of them stepped toward her, grinning, beckoning with his hands. "Come here, m'lady."

"Keep away from me," Wen whispered. She looked at Faustus, stricken and frightened.

"I am not going to hurt you," the soldier purred, reaching for her.

"Keep away from me!" Wen shrieked, and she darted across the room toward the fireplace. The three soldiers chased her, their boots falling heavily, shuddering the floor beneath her. Wen grabbed a cast iron poker from the hearth and whirled about, her eyes filled with terrified tears, her breath hiccupping in her throat. "Get away!" she screamed, brandishing the poker between her fists as the three bellatori drew to skittering, wary halts around her.

"Hoah, come on now, poppet," one of them said, holding out his hands in implore. "Why do you want to do this, huh?"

“Do you think you can fend us all off?” asked another, as he took a step toward her. Wen shrieked at him, her voice escaping her in a shrill sob as she thrust the poker at her.

“Not again!” she screamed, her shoulders shuddering. “None of you -- not ever! Never again!”

“Here, now, we just want to touch you a bit,” said another, cutting to her left. Wen swung about with the poker, weeping, shoving the sharp point of the rod at him.

“Get away from me!” she cried. She whirled as another came at her from her right; as soon as she had swung the poker away from the soldier on her left, he sprang forward, grabbing her around the waist. Wen shrieked, thrashing against him. She felt one of the bellatori wrestle the poker from her hands while another grabbed her by the ankles.

“No!” she wailed, struggling wildly. They began to carry her to the bed, and she fought all the harder. “No, no, no! Pryce! Pryce, help me! Help me!”

They forced her onto her stomach against the bed. Wen struggled, kicking wildly, balling her hands into fists and punching. “Hold her still! Hold her bloody still!” snapped one of them, and someone grabbed Wen’s wrists.

“Hoah, she will be a wild ride! She is fighting like a bergelmir,” laughed another, and Wen felt them jerking at her dressing gown, ripping her clothes. She screamed, struggling and thrashing as someone seized her by the ankles. “No!” she shrieked. “No, no, no! Pryce! Pryce!”

“Someone shut that bloody bitch’s mouth...” one of the muttered, and a pillow fell over Wen’s face. She could feel a firm hand holding it fast, suffocating her, and she struggled, trying to scream. The man behind her grasped her by the waist, pulling her toward him. She could hear the jangle of his belt buckle as he unclasped it, jerking against the waistcord of his breeches to loosen them.

“No!” she wailed, and then she heard a resounding clang, like the tolling of an out-of-tune bell. The man behind her fell off the bed with a rustle of bedclothes and a heavy thud.

“Hoah -- !” she heard another soldier yelp, and then there was a whistle of wind and a moist, sickening crunch. His voice faded abruptly, and Wen felt the hands against her ankles loosen and fall away.

The soldier holding her arms turned her loose, and she raised her head, shrugging aside the pillow. She saw him dart around the side of the bed, curling his hand against his sword hilt and jerking the blade loose of its sheath. “You bloody bastard...” he hissed, and she turned, looking over her shoulder. Her eyes flew wide in disbelief.

“Faustus!”

The steward danced back away from the bed, brandishing the iron poker the guards had taken from Wen. He had used the hooked tip to bash open two of the soldiers’ skulls; they lay crumpled on the ground behind Wen, widening pools of blood and bits of brain about their heads.

The bellatorus charged Faustus, swinging his sword in a sharp, downward arc. Faustus backpedaled, drawing the iron rod up toward his face, parrying the blow. The sword blade and the poker crossed, and Faustus staggered, gritting his teeth and gasping for breath as the soldier put his full weight behind the blade, trying to force Faustus to his knees.

“Faustus!” Wen cried, and she sprang from the bed, hurling herself at the bellatorus. She landed on his back, clamping her legs around his midriff. He staggered beneath her weight, his knees buckling, and then he began to reel about, yowling as Wen splayed her hands around his face, hooking her fingers into his eyes, her nails ripping into the soft, vulnerable tissue. She heard a nasty, squelching sound and felt her fingertips sink into something hot and wet and the guard’s shrieks ripped up shrill octaves as she mashed his eyeballs into oozing pulp. He staggered, his arms pinwheeling, his boots stumbling over the fallen forms of his friends. He slammed Wen into the wall, bashing the breath from her, and as he staggered away, she turned him loose, falling to the floor.

“My lady!” Faustus cried, rushing toward her. He hooked his arm around her waist, and drew her to her feet, letting her lean heavily against him.

“The fourth guard,” Wen said. “Faustus...there was a fourth...”

“He will not be bothering us, either,” Faustus said, and Wen looked past him, her eyes widening as she saw the soldier sprawled and motionless on the floor across the room. What looked like a pair of iron keys had been shoved through his neck, punching through his windpipe and vital blood vessels; a pair of keys still attached to a large, cumbersome key ring.

“It is a good thing you asked me to hold Lord Tertius’ keys awhile longer, my lady,” Faustus said. “For I dare say I made some use of them.”

Wen blinked at him, tears spilling down her cheeks. She hugged him fiercely, throwing her arms around his neck and shuddering. “Hoah, Faustus...!” she gasped.

The door to the chamber burst open, flying back on its hinges in a sudden, sweeping arc, slamming into the wall with enough force to crack the plaster. “Wen!” Pryce cried, rushing into the room. He carried a sword in his hand. The length of the blade was smeared with blood, and there were blood stains on his clothes, his hands. He stared around the room, wide-eyed and frantic, his panic waning into stunned bewilderment as he took each and all of the dead soldiers into account.

“Pryce!” Wen rushed across the room and threw herself into Pryce’s arms. He tossed his sword aside and caught her against his chest, lifting her from her feet, clutching at her.

“Mother Above, I...I heard you screaming, and I...” he gasped, kissing her hair, her ear. “Are you alright?” He set her gently on the floor and cupped his hands against her face. “Are you alright? You were screaming, and I...hoah, I lost my mind, Wen...I just...”

“I am alright,” she said, nodding, weeping anew. She hugged him again, trembling in his arms. “Faustus...he...he saved me, Pryce. He saved my life.”

Pryce looked over his shoulder toward Faustus, meeting the steward’s gaze as he approached. “We have to get out of the palace,” Faustus said. “There are secret tunnels -- passages behind the walls. We can use them. I think I can find the way.”

“Coinin,” Wen gasped, her eyes flying wide. She reached out, grabbing Faustus by the hand. “Faustus, where is Coinin? We cannot leave -- not without her! We cannot leave her here!”

“She is in the slaves quarters below,” Faustus said. “Lord Tertius ordered her there. She --”

“She is in her cell,” Pryce said. “They brought her there yesterday.”

“We have to get her out,” Wen exclaimed, desperately. “We cannot leave her! They are all monsters.” She looked over her shoulder at the dead bellatori.

Here, now, we just want to touch you a bit

“They are all monsters,” she said again, shuddering. “They will hurt her if they find her. They will...” Her voice trailed off, ending in an anguished note.

“I know the way,” Faustus said. “I can bring us there.”

“Grab a sword,” Pryce said, nodding toward the dead bellatorus with the keys jammed in his neck. He genuflected, wincing as he moved, and took his own discarded sword in hand once more. “You know how to wield one?”

Faustus shook his head as he retrieved the soldier’s sword. “No,” he said, rising, studying the weight of the sword in his hand with moderate curiosity in his face. “But I did not know how to wield a poker, either, and seemed to fare well enough.”

“I know how to wield one,” Wen said, and she went to the bed, stooping and wrenching a sword from one of the fallen soldiers’ scabbards. She spun it against her palm and turned to Faustus and Pryce. “Come on. We have to find Coinin.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Ugei...” Subetei moaned softly in the darkness. His quiet voice, filled with tremulous despair roused Einar from sleep. “Ugei, Megetu...ci qariqu...”

“Subetei,” Einar whispered. He opened his eyes, but there was no light within their cell, and he could see nothing. He could hear Subetei moving restlessly, shuffling his feet and hands against the ground nearby. Einar rolled onto his side, wincing as pain speared through his injured shoulders. He pressed his palm against the cold floor and struggled to sit up, gritting his teeth to stifle a whimper of pain as he moved.

“Ugei...” Subetei groaned again. “Ci qariqu...”

“Subetei,” Einar said. He reached out in the darkness, his hands groping. He found the edge of Subetei’s pallet, the coarse wool blankets spread on the ground, and inched forward. He felt Subetei’s arm, then his shoulder and scooted again, gasping at another spasm of pain in his torso. He leaned over Subetei in the darkness, draping his hands against his friend’s shoulders. “Subetei, wake up. Wake up now. It is alright.”

His eyes flew wide as something heavy and strong clamped against his throat, crushing the breath from him, forcing a startled, strangled cry from his mouth. Subetei’s hand mashed against his windpipe, his fingers closed firmly, painfully against Einar’s neck, and Einar wheezed, trying to recoil. “Subetei!” he gagged. “Please -- !”

The immense pressure against his throat slackened, and Subetei’s hand drew back. Einar scuttled backward, clutching at his neck, gasping for breath. “It...it is me,” he panted. “Subetei, it is Einar.”

He heard the rustling of blankets as Subetei sat up. “Einar?” he whispered, sounding confused. Einar felt his hand brush against him, his fingertips touching his hair, and as Subetei pressed his palm gently against Einar’s cheek, he uttered a soft, pained sound. “I hurt you,” he said, stricken.

“It is alright,” Einar said.

“I hurt you,” Subetei said again, aghast. “I...I am sorry. I...I was dreaming. I thought...”

“Subetei, it is alright,” Einar said, patting his hand against Subetei’s. “Did you have a nightmare?”

“Bad dream,” Subetei said. “Very bad.” He tilted Einar’s head, touching his throat gently. “Will leave marks,” he said, sounding upset.

“They will match the others,” Einar said, trying to make Subetei feel better.

“You are little,” Subetei said. “I might have hurt you worse.”

“I am not so little,” Einar said. He felt Subetei’s hand settle against the cap of his head, tousling his hair.

“You are little enough,” Subetei told him, the tone of his voice lending itself to a fond smile. “Snap you apart easily with my fingertips.”

“You could not,” Einar said. He ducked away from Subetei’s hand, laughing.

After a long, quiet moment, Subetei said, “Your shoulders?”

“Still attached,” Einar said.

“They hurt you?”

“No,” Einar said. He did not want Subetei to know how terribly the wounds in his shoulders pained him. It would only distress the Minghan, and there was nothing that could be done about it. The imperial surgeon had not returned offering anything to ease their pain, or to check their wound dressings since the day of their circus combat.

Subetei hooked his fingertips beneath Einar’s chin. “You lie.”

“It does not matter,” Einar said. “We will be out of here soon, Subetei. Out of this cell, out of the palace -- out of the city. We will be back in Engjold, and my father’s healers will tend to us.”

Subetei said nothing.

“It will be alright,” Einar said. “It has not been two days yet, Subetei. It only feels like that.”

“Feels longer,” Subetei said.

“It only feels like that because of the darkness,” Einar said. “And it is cold, and no one has brought us any food. It just feels longer. Wen will get us out of here. I know she will. She went to the carcer and it is all arranged. We just have to be patient. They will come for us.”

“You trust her?” Subetei asked.

“Yes,” Einar said. “Of course I do. Wen is my friend.”

Subetei was quiet for a moment, and Einar knew he did not share Einar’s confidence. “She has dirty skin,” Subetei said at length, and Einar blinked in surprise.

“It is not dirty,” he said with a laugh. “It is dark, Subetei, that is all. Her father is Median, from the south. They look like that in the south.”

“Looks dirty,” Subetei said.

Einar laughed again. “I think she is beautiful,” he said. The words were out of his mouth before he realized it, and his laughter faltered. He felt color stoke in his cheeks, even though Subetei could not see it.

“You make a wife with her when you go home?” Subetei asked.

“What?”

“Make a wife,” Subetei said. “You...you...” His voice faded, and Einar could tell he was frowning, struggling to think of the appropriate word.

“Marry her?” he suggested.

“Yes,” Subetei said. “You marry her -- make a wife with her.”

Einar laughed. “No, I do not think so.”

“Why?” Subetei asked, puzzled.

“Wen would never marry me,” Einar said.

“Why not?”

“Because she loves someone else,” Einar said. He managed a slight, unhappy smile. “I am just a boy to her, while Pryce is brave and...and smart, and...” He closed his eyes. “I wish was like him.”

Subetei patted his head. “You be like Einar,” he said. “You find enough trouble that way.”

Einar smiled. “What were you dreaming about?” he asked, eager to dismiss the subject of Wen -- and the admittedly pleasing, but unlikely prospect of marrying her.

Subetei did not answer at first. Einar frowned uncertainly, wondering if he had upset the Minghan. “I am sorry, Subetei,” he said. “I did not mean to...”

“I dreamed about Megetu,” Subetei said quietly.

“Your brother?”

“Yes. I dreamed his ami came here -- his spirit -- and he said he was dead.”

Einar blinked, startled and stricken. "Subetei..." he whispered. He reached out, finding Subetei's hand in the darkness, hooking his fingers against his friend's palm. "It was just a dream."

"Among my people, dreams are places where spirits can come," Subetei said. "Even if you have no hiimori -- the shaman gift -- they reach you there, speak to you."

"Do you think that is what it was?" Einar asked. "Do you think he is really dead?"
"I...I do not know."

"You told me Megetu left Kharhorin," Einar said.

"Yes," Subetei said. "Many weeks ago with my Kagan."

"Why did they leave?" Einar asked.

Subetei was quiet for a moment. At last he said, "It is secret thing only for Khahl to know."

Einar raised his brow. "Who am I going to tell?" he asked with a laugh. When Subetei did not laugh with him, he said, "I would not tell if you did not want me to, Subetei. Not anybody -- not even Wen. I promise."

Subetei seemed to consider this for a moment, and then he said, "They go to the mountains where Golotmo sleeps. West of here -- very far. They travel many, many days to get there."

"The Khar Mountains?" Einar asked. "Why? Were they trying to escape the empire?"

"They go because it is time," Subetei said, and Einar frowned, puzzled.

"Time for what?"

"To go," Subetei said. "It was promised to us. Megetu takes care of my Kagan. Where my Kagan goes, Megetu goes. What my Kagan says, Megetu does. My Kagan goes to the mountains because it is time, and Megetu goes with him."

"I do not understand," Einar said. "Time for what? What was promised to you?"

Subetei was quiet again. It was as though he debated speaking further, of telling Einar any more. Einar heard him sigh wearily. "Once, this place belonged to us," he said. "This land all around, further than you could walk for many days. It was ours. Our Kagan'Eke, Borjigidal gave it to us a long, long time past. He made an empire for our

people. We were dragon friends. We flew in the sky with dragons. No others but us. They trusted us.”

“Dragons?” Einar whispered, his eyes growing round with amazement. He had heard stories of ancient dragons. His grandfather had told him tales of how the Herr in ages past had fended off attacks from dragonriders invading Engjold, and of using the broad antlers of the hav’elkr to defend their byrs from winged warriors. He had always loved the stories, but had thought them only that -- legends and fables.

“Borjigidal died and bad things came,” Subetei said. “His son Duua became Kagan. His other son Dobun was a trickster. He was angry he did not get to be Kagan, and he did bad things. He tricked the dragons and they left us. They flew to the mountains. He trapped them there, but they promised they would return. Dobun broke the Tegsh and it had to be restored. The dragons would send a sign -- marks on a sacred son -- when the Tegsh was returned, and then the sacred son would call to them and they come again.”

“The Tegsh?” Einar asked.

“Yes,” Subetei said. “The Tegsh is how things are.” Einar was still puzzled, and he jumped, startled as he felt Subetei take him by the wrist. Subetei drew Einar’s hand in the air and pressed his palm against the boy. “Push,” he said.

Einar was bewildered, but pushed against Subetei’s hand. “I push back,” Subetei said, putting gentle pressure behind his own palm, pressing against Einar’s hand. “You push one way; I push other way and we both keep here. You see?”

Einar did not answer. He pushed against Subetei’s hand, trying to understand what Subetei hoped to demonstrate. “Pretend you are strong like me,” Subetei told him, and Einar blinked at him, laughing.

“Thank you for that.”

“Or I am little like you,” Subetei said. “You see now? You push one way. I push back. We are same -- you strong like me, me little like you -- we are same. We keep here, no matter pushing.”

“We are equal?” Einar asked.

“Same,” Subetei said again. “Same strength, same effort, same action. Sometimes my hand moves one way or your hand the other, but we come back to this. We keep here.”

“We balance out,” Einar murmured, realizing. “The Tegsh...it is some sort of balance?”

“It is everything,” Subetei said. “Dragons trust us. We trust them.” Einar had started to lower his hand, but Subetei caught his wrist, pressing his palm firmly against his own. He offered a demonstrative little push. “Tegsh.”

“Balance,” Einar said.

“Dobun trick dragons, hurt them,” Subetei said, and he shoved unexpectedly against Einar’s palm. Einar gasped, startled as Subetei’s strength forced his arm back toward his chest, sending pain shivering through his injured shoulder. “Trust broken. Tegsh broken.”

He hooked his free hand against Einar’s again, easing it forward, not pushing against him anymore. “Time passes,” he said. “Long time, but Tegsh restores.” He released Einar’s hand, letting them rest palm to palm between them again. “You see? Tegsh restores, and dragons come back when sacred son calls to them. He is the sign to tell we are here.” He brought his free hand against Einar’s again, closing his fingers, holding their palms together.

“Megetu is the sacred son?” Einar asked.

Subetei laughed softly, lowering his hands from the boy’s. “No,” he said. “Megetu keeps sacred son safe. My Kagan is the Negh -- son of the seven. He bears special marks. They give him power greater than any Kagan before him. He is the one.”

“That is why they left?” Einar whispered. “To find the dragons? To bring them back?”

“Yes,” Subetei said. “It is time.” There was something in his voice as he said this, an odd and somewhat forlorn tone.

“What is it?” Einar asked, leaning toward him.

“Megetu says strange words in my dream,” Subetei said quietly. “He tells me we are the tricksters -- not Dobun’s sons, our enemy tribes of Oirat.”

“Oirat,” Einar whispered, remembering his father and Aedhir speaking of the Oirat Ulusians. The Oirat had taken Aedhir’s friend, Rhyden Fabhcun. They had been the reason Aedhir had sailed north to Qoyina Bay and inadvertently onto the shores of Sube. He had been following the Oirat. “The Oirat are descendents of Dobun?”

“Dobun and his ally tribes,” Subetei said. “My people -- the Khahl -- are from Duua and his tribes. Oirat say Dobun is rightful Kagan heir. My people say it is Duua. We fight a long, long time. Since the dragons leave, we fight about it.”

“The Oirat were going to the Khar Mountains, too,” Einar said. “Wen’s father told us that. They took his friend and meant to bring him with them into the Khar Mountains. They were killed in Ulus, along Qoyina Bay. The empire killed them all, burned their bodies. My father told me so. But they were going to the Khar.”

“They are not dead,” Subetei said, and Einar blinked, startled. “Some maybe, but not all. Not their son -- Dobun’s heir son. We thought him false. Megetu brought my Kagan to stop him, to find dragons first. In my dream, Megetu comes. He says Oirat are rightful ones. My Kagan is false -- tricks we play on the Tengri.”

“Is that true?” Einar asked.

“I do not know,” Subetei said, sounding troubled. “It is strange.”

“Maybe it was just a dream,” Einar said. “You are worried about your brother.”

“Maybe,” Subetei replied, not sounding the least bit convinced.

“Why would the Oirat have taken Wen’s father’s friend?” Einar asked.

“Aedhir...that is Wen’s father...he said they thought they could lead him to something in the mountains. Do you think they thought he could bring them to the dragons?”

“I do not know,” Subetei said. “We have stories, the promise the dragon lord Ag’iamon gave that they would come when the Tegsh restored. Ag’iamon said he would send a golden falcon from the west to guide the sacred son. Is his friend a falcon?”

“No,” Einar said, and he laughed slightly. “No, he is a man. I mean, he is an Elf. He looks like a man, but he is different. Odhran said they came from a place called Tiralainn. Elves live there, like in our stories, the legends of my people. We called it Alfheim.” His voice faded momentarily. “It is to the west,” he murmured. “Across the sea...” He raised his brows. “Aedhir told my father there were Oirat in Capua, the city where they took his friend, the Elf. He said they showed him something, some sort of

picture. It had writing on it. Aedhir said it was dvergar writing, only he called it something else. Ah-vah-can, I think. They are part of our stories, too. We have found their old cities beneath the Keiliselgr Mountains. They lived in Nidavellir. They left across the sea for the west -- to Alfheim -- thousands of years ago. They were little people -- very small."

"Ah-vah-can," Subetei said, only he mispronounced it, or so Einar thought. It sounded like he said *bagahan* instead.

"Aedhir said his friend could read the writing. He knew what it said, and Aedhir thought the Oirat needed him to read something more in the writing, something in the mountains they had found."

"Bagahan," Subetei said again, clearly not mispronouncing anything now, but speaking a word that was familiar to him. "Little people. The Khar Mountains belonged to them."

"Yes," Einar said, nodding, his eyes widening with fascination at the discovery of this shared lore.

"We have paintings," Subetei said. "Stories and song. They say a bagahan helped Dobun trick our dragons from Ulus and used strong buyu to hide them, trap them under the mountains."

"Buyu?" Einar asked.

"Shaman strength," Subetei said. "Shaman words and writing."

"Donar's hammer," Einar murmured. "The Oirat thought Aedhir's friend could lead them to the dragons."

They heard a soft scraping sound in the darkness from the direction of their cell door -- a key being inserted into the lock. Einar and Subetei both jerked their heads toward the noise, their eyes flying wide.

"Wen!" Einar whispered, his voice full of sudden, eager hope. He drew his legs beneath him to stand, and Subetei caught him by the arm.

"You cannot tell," he said softly. "Not even the girl."

"I will not, Subetei," Einar said. "I gave you my word. You are my friend."

He felt Subetei close his hand against his own. "You are my friend, too."

They heard the groaning of the heavy iron door on its hinges, and a stripe of golden glow appeared -- torchlight from the corridor beyond the door. Einar squinted,

drawing his hand to his face. Subetei stood, drawing his arm around Einar and helping him stumble to his feet.

“Wen?” Einar called softly, using his palm to block the glare of the sudden light.

The door opened fully, bright yellow firelight spilling across the threshold. Einar could see silhouetted forms in the doorway. He shied back as they stepped forward, entering the cell. “I am afraid not, lad,” he heard a man’s voice say, and he gasped in startled fright, recognizing the voice -- Decimus Paulus.

Subetei brought his arm in front of Einar, drawing him back as he positioned himself protectively in front of the boy. “Keep behind me.”

Seven bellatori accompanied the imperial Praetorius into the chamber, and Subetei glared at each one in turn, his brows furrowed, his mouth turned down in a frown. “What do you want here?” he asked. “Boy is hurting enough. You leave him.”

“Separate and shackle them,” Decimus said, ignoring Subetei completely. The seven soldiers moved forward, carrying heavy chains in their hands. “Cuff their wrists and remove the Minghan.”

“Subetei!” Einar drew back, his eyes wide with alarm.

Subetei closed his hands into fists. “You do not touch the boy,” he said to the soldiers. “You leave him.”

Five of them converged upon Subetei, and he fought them, swinging his fists and shouting. He managed to land a few heavy blows to helmets and heads, but there were too many of him, and he was injured; he could not move fast enough to keep them from him. They beat him with heavy wooden batons, driving him to his knees, forcing iron cuffs around his wrists, and shackling his ankles together.

“No!” Einar cried out in dismay. “No! Subetei! Leave him alone!” He tried to rush to his friend, but a sixth soldier stepped into his path.

“Come here, lad,” the bellatori said, striding toward Einar. Einar scuttled back, his eyes flying wide.

“What do you want?”

“Keep from him!” Subetei cried hoarsely, struggling against his chains, shrugging his shoulders and thrashing as the five guards hauled him roughly to his feet. “You leave him! You make trouble with me! Leave the boy!”

“No one is going to hurt you,” the soldier said to Einar, his voice gentle.

“What do you want?” Einar asked again, stumbling back against the wall.

“Put your hands up, lad, touch the wall now,” the bellatorus said. “Let me put these chains on you.”

Einar met his gaze and his brows furrowed. “No,” he said, and he tried to dart past him, rushing toward Subetei. Another soldier intercepted him, grabbing him roughly by the shoulders and shoving him back into the wall again. Einar writhed against the guard’s grasp, screaming as pain seared through his torso at the impact.

“Leave him!” Subetei yelled. They were forcing him through the doorway, dragging him from the cell, and he fought them. It took all five soldiers to keep him under even minute semblance of control. Subetei lunged against them, staggering them as he swung his bound hands wildly. “Einar! No! You leave him! You leave him!”

“Subetei!” Einar cried, struggling with the two soldiers. One of them clapped his hand forcefully against Einar’s throat, shoving him against the wall, and Einar choked for breath as the guard’s palm strangled him. He felt the other slap one of the iron cuffs against his right wrist. “No -- !” he gasped, as the guard jerked against his arms, forcing his left into a cuff as well, binding them together with a short tether of chain. “No!”

One of them knelt to shackle his feet. Einar drove his bare heel into the soldier’s face, punting him with enough force to send him sprawling sideways. “Little Enghan rot...” hissed the one throttling him, and he balled his free hand into a fist, ramming it against Einar’s injured shoulder. Einar twisted, arching his back and whooping for enough breath to scream. His voice escaped him in a strangled caw and he crumpled, his knees failing him, his mind reeling from the pain.

They forced the shackles around his ankles and then dragged him stumbling in tow. They pulled him to the far wall of the chamber and grabbed his hands, forcing them above his head. Einar looked up, dazed with pain, still gasping for breath, and watched in horror as they hooked one of the links binding his cuffed wrists together around an iron hook protruding from the wall. Einar squirmed, struggling to pull his hands away. “No...!” he said. “No...no...!”

The guard he had kicked in the face seized him by the face, his fingers clamping painfully against his chin and jaw. He shoved Einar’s head back against the wall and

leaned toward him. "I lost three hundred dorotus in the arena the other day on your account, rot," he said, his nose seeping a thin trail of blood, any hint of the former gentleness in his voice gone. "You got this coming to you rightly due, I say."

"That is enough, Caletus," Decimus said from behind them. He walked slowly toward Einar as the guard, Caletus, opened his hand from Einar's chin and stepped back in respectful deference. "You and Brocchus may go. Leave a torch by the door and help the others subdue the Minghan."

"Yes, sir," the two soldiers said, and they turned, leaving the cell. The heavy iron door swung shut behind them, slamming with resounding thunder. Einar flinched at the sound, tugging fervently, vainly against his chains, trying to free the link that forced his hands helplessly above his head. He could curl his fingers around the iron hook, grasping clumsily at it, but could not draw enough slack in the chain to pull the link loose.

"What are they going to do to Subetei?" he asked.

Decimus looked at him, raising his brow. "They are going to kill him," he replied.

Einar blinked at him, stricken. "No," he said, shaking his head. He jerked against his chains, shrugging his shoulders, struggling. "No, no, please -- you cannot! No!"

"Your plan with Lady Fainne-Finamur was very clever, Einar," Decimus said, his voice mild, nearly pleasant. Einar fell still, his struggles subsiding as he blinked at the Praetorius, startled. The corner of Decimus' mouth lifted slightly. "Yes, I have learned of your little schemes. It is difficult not to when forty prisoners escape the arena and liberate my carcer."

"They will come for me," Einar said, his brows drawn. He lifted his chin defiantly. "They will come for me and Subetei. They will free us."

"They will not make it, lad," Decimus said. "You see, there is a bit of contingency that you and my lady did not count on -- and that is the fact that Aulus Tertius called a legion in full from the border of Ullus back to Kharhorin two days ago. They have all nearly arrived now. There is nearly a full cohort here alone on the palace grounds."

Einar blinked at him, stricken.

Decimus smiled again. "You might have had hope, had you only the one hundred Lord Tertius ordinarily keeps on hand to contend with. I am sure that is what my Lady

Fainne-Finamur anticipated. Skilled Minghan and Seggr warriors might have stood a chance, even outnumbered two to one. You might have made a go of your escape. But more than ten to one?" He shook his head, looking at Einar sorrowfully. "You did not trust me. I would have let you go -- all of you go."

"You are lying," Einar seethed, closing his hands into fists and twisting desperately against his bonds. He could feel the edge of the iron cuffs shearing against his wrists, cutting into his flesh. "You meant to kill us all from the first. Kill us, or sell us into slavery -- into the circus where we would be butchered for sport!"

"That was Aulus Tertius, not me," Decimus said. "You lost friends to the arena. You are hurt for it, lad, grievously so, and that shames me. There was no honor in that. Tertius disobeyed imperial mandate by placing you there. If I could have prevented it, if it had been within my power, I would have."

"You are lying," Einar said again, tugging fiercely against his chains, feeling blood begin to run in thin rivulets down his forearms as his wrists were sliced open. He spat at the Praetorius. "You are a liar!"

"I am a man of my word," Decimus said. "I gave my word to you, Einar -- and to your people -- when you signed the surrender demand. I promised you and your fellows would be returned to Engjold, and you would have been. I would have seen it done. I would have set you free."

"Liar!" Einar cried, lunging against his chains. "You promised my uncle's throne to the Nordri kyns in exchange for gersimi! I know about your promises! You call that freedom -- a Nordri Konung who is a puppet for your empire?"

"We do not want your throne, Einar," Decimus said. "Or your lands. We never have. We have only ever wanted your black powder -- your gersimi. Yes, we would have given the throne to the Nordri in exchange for it. That was our bargain, and I told you, I am a man of my word. But our allegiance to them would have ended there. No puppet Konung to the empire, lad. Your tribes would have been free to fight to reclaim what is rightfully yours. Your people have carved a history of fighting and warring for that crown. You would have done so again, with little consequence or interest to the empire."

"You are lying," Einar said.

Decimus smiled at him sadly. "No, lad. I am not. You could be on your way home now, back to Engjold and your father, but you did not trust me." He shook his head. "And now you conspire against me? Your friends attack the palace, engage my soldiers? I cannot stand idly by and let my men be butchered. You have left me no choice in this. You have killed them all -- your people, and your friends."

Einar shied back against the wall. "Wen..." he whispered.

"She is dead as we speak," Decimus told him, and Einar's eyes grew enormous with shock. His knees slackened, and he slumped against his chains, his breath escaping him in a soft, anguished sound.

"Yes, lad. It is a blessing for her. Aulus Tertius grew tired of courtesy, it seems...the coy, polite waltz of noblewomen and men. He raped her."

Einar blinked up at him, his brows furrowing in sudden outrage.

"I cannot abide by such discourtesy," Decimus said. "Such behavior is unbecoming to men of civility and reason. I brought him to task for it." He leaned toward Einar. "Aulus Tertius is dead. As is your good lady, and your friend, Lieutenant Finamur. It was a shame to kill him, I confess. I rather admired his tenacity." He raised his brow at Einar. "As I admire yours, Einar."

He began to walk toward Einar. He curled his hand about the hilt of his dagger, sliding the blade from its sheath. Einar drew back, his eyes widening all the more at the sight of the knife, and he began to jerk frantically against his chains.

"No...!" he whimpered, gasping for frightened, panicked breath. He coiled his fingers around the iron hook above his head, struggling to pull the chain link free. "No...no!"

"I will make this quick for you," Decimus said. "I would not see you suffer."

Einar punted his feet up and out, grasping the hook above him with his hands and pulling himself up. He punted Decimus in the sternum with one foot, knocking the breath from the Praetorius and catching him off guard, staggering him. His other foot clipped Decimus in the forearm, and as Decimus stumbled, the knife flew out of his hand, clattering to the floor behind him.

Decimus floundered, regaining his footing. He looked at Einar, his brows furrowed, his mouth turned down into a frown. "That was foolish."

Einar jerked against his chains with all of his might, his fingers fumbling desperately, his eyes flown wide with terror. Decimus turned, stooping, reaching for his fallen dagger. "Do not make this harder on yourself, Einar."

Einar grasped the hook again, hauling himself up, using the leverage to kick his shackled feet out again. He swung his heels up, and the length of chain between his ankles slapped against the top of Decimus' head. The Praetorius started to turn, and Einar jerked his legs, forcing the chain down beneath Decimus' chin. Einar cried out hoarsely, folding his knees, wrenching the chain taut against Decimus' throat.

Decimus grunted in startled surprise, staggering backward, his hands darting for the chain. He struggled to hook his fingertips beneath it, choking for breath, and Einar crossed his ankles at the apex of the man's shoulders, tightening the chain against his windpipe. Decimus stumbled, thrashing against Einar, his arms pinwheeling as his face infused with bright, strained color. He wheezed, gagging, pawing at the chain, his fingers hooked into claws as he groped wildly, blindly over his shoulders for Einar's legs.

Einar gritted his teeth, his brows furrowed as Decimus shoved him repeatedly back against the wall. Pain ripped through his shoulders and spine with every brutal impact, but he mustered all of his strength, forcing his legs tighter, drawing the chain as taut as he could. Decimus tried to yell out, but his voice was strangled. Spittle flew from his lips as he thrashed and struggled like a fish caught on a hooked line. He rammed himself backward; Einar folded his legs to bear the brunt of the impact with his thighs, and then he wrenched his hips, twisting himself sideways, throttling the Praetorius all the more.

He could see Decimus' face in profile as the man fought against him. His face had turned purple, and a thick froth of saliva foamed around his mouth. His tongue protruded, his lips curled back in a desperate sneer as he struggled for breath.

After a long moment, Decimus' struggles waned. His hands fell away from his throat, drooping lifelessly to his sides, his fingers brushing against the dirt floor. The whistling, moist sound of his wheezing breath faded into silence, and he slumped heavily against Einar's legs, his chin nodding toward the floor. Einar held him there, the muscles in his legs trembling with strained exhaustion, his eyes wide, his own breath

fluttering frantically from his throat. His shoulders screamed with pain, taxed by bearing him aloft as he struggled to keep his grip on the iron hook. Decimus did not move, but Einar did not let him go.

It could be a trick, he thought. He could be pretending. It could be a trick!

He heard a loud, heavy thud against the outside of his cell door, and looked up, frightened. He thought he heard muffled voices shouting out, the clattering of steel from the corridor beyond, but he could not be certain. He had a hard time hearing anything over the sounds of his own hoarse, labored breathing, and the panicked, pounding rhythm of his pulse in his ears.

He looked down at Decimus' motionless form and slowly, cautiously uncrossed his calves. He hooked his right leg around Decimus' head, sliding the short tether of chains from beneath the Praetorius' chin. Decimus crashed forward, collapsing face-first to the ground, and Einar recoiled in startled, reflexive fright.

It took him a long, terrified moment before he realized it had been gravity -- and not some last trick of the Praetorius' -- that had seen Decimus slump to the floor. He heard another loud, thunderous boom as something smashed against the outside of the door, and he jerked, crying out sharply in startled fear. He looked past Decimus' body toward the knife on the ground. He looked down at the Praetorius' hip and saw a saber sheathed at his belt. *I have to get out of here. I have to get those blades. Subetei is out there. He needs me!*

He planted his feet against Decimus' body, one against his shoulder, the other against the small of his back. Using Decimus for a perch, he arched his back, lifting himself clumsily into the air. This extra modicum of added height from the floor did not offer much slack in the chains between his wrists, but it was enough. After a moment of struggling to inch the chain link along the hook, Einar was able to wiggle it over the tip, freeing himself. He crashed backward gracelessly, smacking the back of his head against the wall and landing on his rump, his legs sprawled against Decimus' body. He groaned, kicking the Praetorius away from him and struggled to rise to his feet.

He crawled onto his knees and turned Decimus over, shoving against him. He drew back, his eyes flying wide as Decimus flipped toward him; the Praetorius' face was still plum-colored and swollen, his eyes half-opened, his mouth ringed with a drying

spray of bloody saliva. His tongue lolled out of the corner of his lips, and Einar could see the deep crease of bruising the chains had left in his throat.

Tearing his eyes away from the grisly sight of the Praetorius' face, Einar reached for Decimus' hip, curling his hands around the hilt of his sword and tugging it loose of its scabbard. Another heavy thud resounded from the cell door, and Einar scrambled backward, frightened, drawing the blade defensively before him. He could definitely hear the sounds of men crying out and metal banging from outside. He did not understand what it was, but he knew something was happening out there.

"Subetei!" he whispered. He scrambled to his feet, limping clumsily in his shackles. He shuffled around Decimus' body toward the dagger and leaned over, snatching it in hand. As his fingers curled about the hilt, he heard a sudden sqawling from behind him -- the iron door swinging out on its hinges as someone pulled against it.

Einar whirled, stumbling backward, jerking both the sword and the dagger before him. He nearly tripped over his chains, and floundered to regain his balance, stumbling sideways against the wall. The cell door swung open wide, and Einar drew back in terror as a man in the bright red coat of an imperial bellatori charged into the chamber, bellowing loudly, hoarsely, and brandishing a sword between his fists.

"No!" Einar cried, stepping forward, swinging his sword. "Get back!"

"Einar!" he heard the soldier exclaim, and then he yelped again in startled surprise at Einar's attack; he barely drew his own blade up in time to block Einar's frantic, furious swing. Einar blinked at the man between the vertex of their crossed blades, and he felt the hilt of his sword slip from his hand, the blade dropping to the floor. He stumbled back, wide-eyed and confused.

"Hagal?"

Hagal lowered his sword, holding his free hand out to Einar. "Einar, it is me." He wore his kyrtil and leggings beneath the heavy scarlet justicoat and had donned the silver helmet of a bellatorus, but his dark blonde hair poked out from beneath the rudimentary disguise in wayward tufts. "We have come for you."

Einar dropped his dagger and stumbled forward as Hagal rushed toward him. They fell together, and Hagal seized him in a fierce embrace. "Praise Urd," he gasped, clinging to Einar. "I thought I would never see you again!"

“You came,” Einar whispered, shuddering against his friend. “You...you came...!”

“We have to hurry,” Hagal said, drawing away from him. “We have to go. There are soldiers everywhere.”

“There is a legion called back from the border to the city,” Einar said. “A cohort at least here at the palace.”

Hagal blinked at him, stricken and surprised. “How do you...?”

Einar nodded at Decimus. “He told me.”

“We have to get out of here,” Hagal said. He hurried toward Decimus’ body, dropping to his knees. He groped along Decimus’ torso, patting his palms against his coat and dipping his fingers into pockets and beneath lapels, searching for the keys to Einar’s chains.

“Where is Subetei?” Einar asked, limping toward Hagal. “Is he alright? They took him, and I do not...”

“I am here, little one,” he heard a soft, delicate voice say from the doorway. He whirled, his eyes widening, his mouth unfurling in a broad, stunned grin.

“Subetei!” he cried. He shambled toward his friend, trying to run without much success given the tether of his chains. Subetei had already been turned loose of his bonds, and he stepped against Einar, enfolding the boy in his strong arms, pressing his hand against the back of Einar’s head.

“You hurt?” he whispered, turning his face down to the cap of Einar’s pate. “He hurt you?”

Einar shook his head. “No, I am alright,” he said. He looked up at Subetei, his brows lifting in anguish to see new bruises forming along his face where the bellatori had beaten him. “But they hurt you...!”

“Not bad,” Subetei told him with a smile. “I bounce good.” He looked beyond Einar’s shoulder at Decimus as Hagal cried out happily, standing up and holding aloft the keys he had found. Subetei glanced down at Einar, raising his brows, visibly impressed. “You do that?”

Einar nodded, holding out his hands as Hagal set about finding the right key for his manacles.

“I think I keep as your friend, Einar,” Subetei said. “Safer that way.”

Einar laughed.

“We took the carcer first,” Hagal said as Einar hurriedly squirmed his way into Decimus’ breeches and shrugged the Praetorius’ justicoat over his shoulders. Decimus had him in both length and girth, but it was better than running around naked. Hagal tossed him one of Decimus’ jackboots and Einar lifted his foot, holding the boot sole up for comparison.

“Too big,” he said, tossing it aside.

“We have eighty men between the Seggr and the Minghan,” Hagal said as Einar retrieved his sword and dagger. “But with six hundred bellatori, that is not going to help much.”

“It will have to do,” Einar said, shoving the dagger into the sheath on Decimus’ belt.

“I know the way out,” Subetei said as they headed for the door. “Secret tunnels Torachans do not know. They take us to the palace grounds. We go from there into the city. My men lead us through alleys to gates. We can go east to the byr of my people. Two days’ travel. We have more Minghan there -- seventy at least.”

“In two days, we could be at Engjold,” Hagal said.

The corridor was crowded with armed Seggr and Minghan warriors. They had fended off the soldiers stationed in the tunnel, and no more had come to engage them, but the air was thick and tremulous with frightened, panicked tension.

“And we will run headlong into any other legions the empire has sent against the Herr,” Einar said. He glanced at Subetei. “We will go east, make our way around to the Urlug foothills. But not yet. We have to go back upstairs.”

“Tunnels down here,” Subetei told him. “Soldiers upstairs.”

“And so are Wen and Pryce,” Einar said. “We are not leaving without them.”

“Einar...” Hagal said, his eyes wide with alarm as he reached for his friend. “We cannot risk -- ”

“They are our friends,” Einar snapped, his brows furrowing as he shrugged his arm loose of Hagal’s grasp. “We would not have this chance if it were not for them. We are not leaving them behind.”

Hagal and Subetei exchanged glances, but neither said a word. Einar shouldered his way among the ranks, shouting out in a loud voice. "I want every man with a shield at the front of the line -- overlap them. We are going back to the first level of the palace!"

Murmurs fluttered through the crowd as Enghan boys and Minghan men blinked at one another in bewildered alarm.

"Pryce and Wen have risked themselves for us and we are not abandoning them!" Einar cried. "If none of you will follow me, I will go myself. I am not leaving them!"

Subetei fell in step beside Einar, clapping his hand against the boy's shoulder. "I follow you," he said. He looked over his shoulder, his brows furrowed as he called out, "My Minghan follow, too! Qamug turgen! Bide yabuqu ujeku olqu ba sula qani!"

They followed the passage along the cellblock past the gated guard post. From there, they turned, heading back toward the stone staircase leading back up to the palace's main level. As they charged along, a heavy shield line posted at their front to batter their way through any imperial resistance they might encounter, they plowed almost head-first into a group of three people as they rounded a sharp bend in the passageway.

"Hoah -- !" a man in the group cried out, scuttling back, leveling a sword at them.

"Bellatori!" shouted one of the Seggr, and from above the shoulders of the shield bearers, dozens of spears suddenly lowered, their tips shoved toward the group.

"No!" Einar cried out, shouldering his way forward, ducking and weaving among his men. "No, wait! It is Pryce!"

Pryce blinked in stunned disbelief as Einar pushed past the shield line and stumbled toward him. He was nearly unrecognizable to Einar, his face obscured with blood and dirt, and a scraggly growth of beard. He was emaciated; his tattered, filthy clothes drooping on his lean frame. He stared at Einar with the eyes of a dog that had been beaten so cruelly and so often, it no longer knew anything but to snap back in its own desperate defense.

He staggered backward, positioning himself defensively in front of his two companions, a man Einar did not know who bore the tattoo of an imperial slave on his face, and a young woman with dark skin.

“Wen!” Einar gasped. “Wen, it is me! Wen!” He tried to move toward them, meaning to rush for Wen, but Pryce stepped swiftly into his path, drawing his sword up in a sharp, menacing arc, aiming the tip for Einar’s throat.

At this threatening gesture, Subetei stepped forward, brandishing his own sword. “Drop your blade,” he said.

Pryce recoiled, his eyes flying wide, his breath escaping him in a frightened gasp. “Keep away from us,” he said, his brows furrowed, his eyes glassy with frantic alarm as he stared between Einar and the large Minghan.

“Pryce,” Wen said, laying her hand against Pryce’s shirt sleeve. “Pryce, it...hoah, it is Einar.” Her eyes flooded with tears and her mouth lifted in a relieved, desperate smile. “It is alright, Pryce. It is Einar!”

Pryce glanced at her, and then at Einar, the hard determination in his face at last softening. He blinked, and then his fingers relaxed, his sword dropping from his hand. “Einar...”

Einar went to him, embracing him. “It is alright,” he said. “It is alright, Pryce.” He looked over Pryce’s shoulder at Wen and reached for her, drawing her into their embrace. “You are alive,” Einar said, closing his eyes. “He told me you were dead, but I...I could not...”

“We have to go back.” Wen looked up at Einar, her eyes tear-filled and pleading. “We have to go back to the cellblock, Einar. There is a little girl there. She is all alone, and we cannot leave her. Please, we...we have to...!”

“Alright,” Einar said, nodding. He pressed his hand against her face. *Anything*, he thought, his heart seized with anguish as Decimus Paulus’ words echoed in his mind.

Aulus Tertius grew tired of courtesy, it seems...the coy, polite waltz of noblewomen and men. He raped her.

Anything, Wen, he thought. Anything for you.

They returned to the cellblock, finding the chamber in which the little slave girl, Coinin had been locked. The child rushed into Wen’s arms, coiling her arms around Wen’s neck as Wen hoisted her in the air, clutching at her, weeping anew.

“Wen!” the little girl cried, sobbing against Wen’s shoulder. “Wen!”

“I am here,” Wen whispered, kissing Coinin’s cheek. “I am here, Coinin. Hush now.”

The little girl saw the slave man behind Wen and cried out, reaching for him. “Faustus!” she bleated, and the man, Faustus stepped toward her, catching her small hands and kissing her fingertips. “All of us are here, lass, safe and sound,” he told her softly, stroking his hand against her cheek. “Do not be frightened.”

They heard the dim and distant thunder of hundreds of boots rushing down the stairs into the lower level of the palace, the faint but resounding roar of bellatori shouting together in fervent refrain. The Seggr and Minghan looked around, wide-eyed with renewed alarm, and Subetei closed his hand against Einar’s sleeve. “We go now,” he said, his expression grave. He nodded to indicate the corridor. “Passageway starts there. Hidden door inside wall. We go now, or we do not at all.”

Einar nodded. “Take us there.” He glanced at Wen, Pryce and Faustus, and their tearful reunion with the frightened child. “We have to hurry,” he said, drawing Pryce’s gaze. “Bellatori -- lots of them from the sounds of it.”

“How do we get out of here?” Pryce asked, his eyes darting about as if he thought about clawing at the walls, scrabbling desperately for any escape.

“Subetei said there is a hidden tunnel up ahead along the block,” Einar said. “It will take us up to the grounds. Come on.”

The tunnel was narrow and dank. The Minghan and Seggr all managed to cram their way into its cramped confines and seal the hidden door in the corridor wall behind them only scant moments before the rushing, roaring sound of bellatori filled their ears. The soldiers’ cries and heavy, pounding footfalls were muffled through the thick stone wall, but the Seggr huddled together in the darkness, immobilized with fear. The Minghan had eased their way to the front of the group to lead them through the passageways.

“Everyone, quiet,” Subetei hissed. Wen tucked her cheek against Coinin’s, carrying the girl against her hip, bouncing her as she whispered softly, trying to quiet the girl’s frightened, gasping mewls. “Move forward,” Subetei said. “Keep together. Your

four there take lead. The rest of you, grab ten men and bring up rear. Keep with little ones -- keep quiet."

"Teyimu, bahadur," the Minghan whispered together, moving swiftly and in near silence among the crowd, easing their way to their respective positions as Subetei had ordered them.

Subetei patted his hand against Coinin's head, drawing the little girl's wide-eyed, frightened gaze. "Do not fear," he told her, smiling. "Soldiers do not know this place. They cannot follow here."

Coinin blinked at the enormous, hulking man and then shied, pressing her forehead against Wen's shoulder, tugging her hair about her face to hide.

They followed the passageway for a long time in relative, frightened silence. At last they came to the end, a point where the tunnel was blocked by a stone wall. This apparent dead end sent a frantic, uncertain murmur fluttering among the Seggr, but the Minghan seemed unbothered. Two of them stood facing the wall, patting their hands against the stone until one of them triggered a hidden release mechanism. The wall rumbled, and then slid aside into a recess in the tunnel wall, revealing a doorway into a chamber beyond, a chamber illuminated by the soft, dancing glow of candlelight.

As Wen carried Coinin over the threshold, her eyes widened in recognition. "Hoah..." she breathed. "The dragon shrine!"

They had entered the subterranean chamber beneath the dragon shrine, just behind the blue dragon mounted against the ceiling. She looked up at its underbelly, at its wings outstretched, and then at Ag'iamon's massive skull ahead of her. She heard the soft, sharp intake of Pryce's breath as he stepped out of the tunnel behind her and caught sight of the dragon above him. "Hoah...!"

Coinin lifted her head from Wen's shoulder and her eyes grew round. "Bird," she whispered, blinking in wonder. She looked at Pryce and pointed at the dragon. "Pryce, look at the bird!"

"I see it, lass," Pryce said, breathlessly. "Hoah...Mother Above, I see it."

"What is this place?" Einar gasped. The Seggr youths gawked at the dragon as they entered the chamber, their eyes wide with shock, their mouths agape.

“Sacred place,” Subetei said. He approached the pedestal bearing Ag’iamon’s skull, and paused long enough to genuflect before it, lowering his face to the ground. “Qariqu,” he whispered, as he rose to his feet again. He glanced over his shoulder at Einar. “Secret place. Soldiers do not know it. We keep here.” As the last of the group entered the chamber, two Minghan tapped against the walls again, releasing another mechanism that closed the hidden door behind them. “We are safe here. We wait until night, and then we go out onto the grounds, leave the palace. Safest then.”

“By nightfall, the grounds will be swarming with bellatori,” Hagal said.

“They already are,” Pryce said grimly.

“Subetei is right,” Einar said. “If he says it is safe here, I trust him. We can use the cover of darkness. We will wait.”

The Seggr and Minghan began to settle themselves in for an uneasy wait. They sat together, crammed shoulder-to-shoulder along the walls of the small room, huddling together for warmth. Einar watched Wen and Pryce sit next to one another against the wall, with Coinin tucked against Pryce’s hip, resting her cheek against his chest. The slave man, Faustus, sat beside them, holding Coinin’s hand.

Pryce drew his arm around Wen, and she leaned against his chest, closing her eyes and trembling. He lowered his face toward hers, whispering to her, stroking her hair with his hand. He pressed his lips against her forehead, his brows lifting as if he felt pain, and there was something so sorrowful and poignant about this gesture, his expression, that Einar felt his heart ache with envious longing. Wen draped her hand against Pryce’s chest and nodded her head, visibly drawing comfort from whatever soft, tender words he offered her.

He jumped, startled as Subetei’s hand settled against his shoulder. “You should sleep,” Subetei told him gently. “I keep you safe here, all of you. You rest awhile.”

“I am not tired,” Einar said quietly. He risked looking at Wen again, but she had closed her eyes, nestled beneath the protective shelter of Pryce’s arm.

Subetei glanced toward Wen and then smiled at Einar. “She thinks good of you.”

Einar blushed slightly, blinking at his toes. “I...I do not...what?”

Subetei tousled his hair and then steered him toward the nearest wall, planting his hand against the cap of his head. "I think good of you, too," he said. "Go to sleep now. Nothing we can do but wait."

Chapter Sixteen

It is the fourth morning, Odhran thought, standing to face the pale light of the new sunrise as it spread across the sky. His breath floated from his mouth in an iridescent haze, and his brows drew slightly as the blazing crescent of the sun's proscenium appeared against the edge of the eastern horizon. He did not know what he expected to see. If the Enghan Herr had marched upon Ulu as they had planned, Odhran and Tacita were too far away to even hear the faintest echo of the battle, much less hope to spy a glimpse of it.

And if Captain Fainne's plan worked, there will not even be a battle, Odhran thought. He turned away from the sun and back to his bergelmir, cinching some cords tightly as he bundled his blanket rolls against the saddle.

If Captain Fainne's plan had worked, he would have arrived in Kharhorin already. He would have surrendered himself -- along with his knowledge of gersimi production and his weapons -- to the empire, and begun whatever negotiations he could wrangle for Pryce and Wen's release. *If Captain Fainne's plan worked, he has betrayed the Crown,* Odhran thought, his heart seized with a terrible, mournful weight. He paused, his gloved fingers poised against the binding straps of sinew, and lowered his gaze to the ground. *He can never come home again unless I am able to speak to the King, make him understand.*

He glanced over his shoulder at Tacita. She was crouched on the ground, her long legs folded beneath her as she finished rolling her blankets together and bound them with cords. He did not need to tell her this was the fourth day -- the day the Enghan had declared they would charge against the empire. She knew it all too well; it was apparent in her face. Although Odhran had done his best to talk to her during their journey, sometimes rambling inanelly and for hours in the vain hope of distracting her from her pain, bolstering her spirits, a profound melancholia had come upon her. She had withdrawn, seldom saying much at all. She rode behind Odhran with her eyes fixed on nothing in particular for most of the day, trusting in him to steer them along the

proper course across the plains of Eng, and in her bergelmir to keep in step with the one in front of it.

Each morning that passed was one in which Odhran found himself dimly surprised to discover Tacita still with him. He could tell by her face, her eyes that she thought about leaving, about turning her bergelmir back to the east and racing after Aedhir. Odhran knew the only thing that kept her from this was the tattoo on her face, the catasta mark that stripped her of any rights as a citizen in the empire. If she had been a woman as free in form as she was in spirit, she would never have left Aedhir's side, in all likelihood. But she was no idiot; she knew she could do nothing to help him as a slave.

He was also somewhat surprised that she had not killed herself. She did not want to go to Tiralainn without Aedhir; a place where she would know no one, and where she would be a stranger among strangers. Even though Aedhir had promised her freedom there, Tacita understood that her catasta mark branded her as different, no matter where she might roam. Odhran would see her sometimes, her hand draped lightly against the butt of the an'daga holstered at her hip, her fingers toying absently with the pistol, and he knew she thought about drawing it, pressing the barrel against her temple. She was a woman with precious little hope; she had lost her daughter, and a man she had considered a husband to her -- and now she had lost another man, one she had considered her true love. Every night, Odhran lay awake beneath his blankets, his body tensed, his mind too anxious for sleep as he listened for the soft clack of the doghead drawing back against her thumb, the inevitable thunder that would roll across the undulating plains of Eng, echoing for miles as she pulled the trigger.

The only thing that kept Tacita from this was the dragons. No matter her despair, Odhran knew that she clung to this last, feeble scrap of hope, as the Oirat had for the dragons. She wanted to believe that Aedhir would find his way to them again. Sometimes, she would spend hours shooting hopeful glances over her shoulder, as if she hoped that he had changed his mind and ridden after them for Sube instead of Kharhorin. She wanted to believe he would come, and this meager hope, no matter how ultimately futile, kept the gun safely at her hip.

“We should start bearing northwest today,” Odhran said to her, finishing his loading of the saddle and turning to her. Tacita had risen to her feet, cradling her blankets against the crook of her elbow as she set about fastening them to her own saddle. She glanced at him and nodded.

They had been following a fairly straightforward course so far, heading due west. If they continued much further, though, they would inadvertently cross the border into Ulus. By Odhran’s best estimations, they were somewhere southeast of Sverd’vatn Bay, the boundary between Eng and the region of Enthimork. Turning north would steer them toward the Merki Isthmus and Sube once more.

Odhran fished his compass from his belt pouch and flipped it open, studying the movement of the needle as he oriented himself to their direction. “Are you hungry?” he said. “I already ate some flatbread. I left it out for you there, by the fire, in case you were -- ”

“Thank you, no,” Tacita said, jerking against the sinew straps to fether her blankets in place. She had not eaten anything by Odhran’s observation since leaving the Herr. He knew she must have been hungry, but even his most gentle of food offers went refused. He watched her look over her shoulder toward the east, her blue eyes filled with poignant sorrow, and he knew that she knew.

It is the fourth morning, he thought.

He looked down at his compass, granting her polite privacy in her grief, feeling intrusive. He lifted his gaze and looked to the southwest, where the Khar Mountains were dim shadows along the horizon, caught between morning and night in a dusky drape. The Khar stretched beyond the borders of Lydia and into Ulus, reaching for them. He had watched them every morning, keeping them southwest in his view, using them as a landmark to gauge their progress. The mountains were tiny from his proximity, no more than shadowy points along the horizon, but they drew closer every day.

Something caught his eye and he frowned. The Khar were so high and immense, even from his distance, Odhran could sometimes spy cloud banks caught among their far-off peaks. There seemed to be some lingering there today, dark against the plum-

colored background of the lightening sky; dark and relatively large in comparison to the peaks, looming among them.

“We might see snow today,” he remarked. “Or tomorrow, to judge by those clouds.” The wind patterns off of the Chagan Sea bore peculiar impact on the weather in their region. Clouds lingered along the western side of the Khar mountain range, forced into impassive inertia by opposing winds from Eng to the west and the sea to the east. Odhran imagined this was why Ulus and Engjold saw such massive amounts of snowfall during their long winters. The snow fronts had no place to go, and would hover for days, even weeks at a time over the landscape.

Tacita followed his gaze, but did not say anything. Odhran closed his eyes, feeling the wind against his face, rustling his hair. “Feels like the wind is mostly south-southwest,” he murmured thoughtfully. “If we turn northwest, we might miss that front along the Khar range.”

Tacita nodded, but still said nothing. She had walked over to the smoldering remains of their campfire and began to kick dirt and snow onto the embers, stirring them around with her boot to extinguish them. She would cry at night. Odhran would hear her, and there was such desolation in the quiet sounds of her tears that his heart would ache. He would lie awake listening, frozen with indecision, wondering if he should go to her, if he should try and comfort her. He would never move; there was nothing he could proffer that would alleviate her pain. He was riding toward Arnora -- someone he cared about -- while she was doing just the opposite. She was abandoning Aedhir, leaving behind someone she loved. There was nothing he could say that would change or lessen that.

“Are we ready, then?” He always asked her and every morning, the answer in her eyes remained the same: *I am not ready for this. I will never be.*

She nodded, stomping her foot against the dead fire bed for good measure. She lifted the unwrapped package of flatbread from beside the fire, and folded it neatly, returning it to him. “Keep it,” he said. “In case you get hungry later. We might not stop for awhile, and I...”

Tacita smiled at him, a thin phantom of good humor, but something within her face besides sorrow nonetheless -- at least for that moment. She knew he was trying his

best, and was grateful for it. "Alright, Odhran," she said, tucking the packet of food inside one of her belt pouches.

They traveled for nearly an hour before Odhran brought them to a halt. The sun had risen in full behind them, filling the sky with bright, golden light. Odhran turned his face toward the southwest and studied the horizon for a long, silent moment, frowning slightly.

"What is it?" Tacita asked, following his gaze.

"Those clouds are getting closer," Odhran said. He shifted his weight in his saddle as his bergelmir squirmed restlessly beneath him, shaking its head against the slackened reins, the bit in its mouth. He glanced at Tacita. "They are moving toward us - against the wind."

"What?" Tacita blinked, finding the line of encroaching shadows just beyond the Khar Mountains. "How is that possible?"

"It is not," Odhran said, leaning over and reaching for one of his saddle bags. He fumbled around in the pouch for a moment before pulling out a collapsible scope Aedhir had given to him. He opened the scope fully between his hands and brought it up to his face, directing the larger lens at the horizon.

"What is it, then?" Tacita asked. "If they are not clouds, what are they?"

"I cannot tell," Odhran said, adjusting the scope. His brows furrowed slightly. "Whatever it is, it is still too far away to get a good look at it. But it is moving fast, that is for sure." He lowered the scope from his face and frowned again. "Migratory birds, maybe?" he murmured, thinking aloud. "Wen told me she and Pryce saw whales migrating in the Muir Fuar. Maybe mountain birds migrate late in the season for the south as well."

"Birds?" Tacita asked, raising her brow.

"I can see things fluttering around, winking in the sunlight," he said. "Like birds flapping their wings." His frown deepened. "Must be fairly damn large birds."

As he studied the cloud of dark, indistinct -- but definitely moving -- objects, he felt something shiver through him; something fleeting, like a soft breeze or delicate fingers brushing against his hair. He lowered the scope slightly, frowning again.

Odhran? he thought he heard a voice whisper, a faint and quiet murmur, like a breath against his ear. He glanced over his shoulder at Tacita. "What?"

"When Marcus and I traveled to the village of Leucas, off Bora Cove in Lydia, we heard all sorts of lore about the Khar," Tacita said, studying the horizon. "Stories of gigantic bats that lived in the peaks that would swoop down at nightfall upon the smaller herding villages north of Leucas to steal livestock."

"Giant bats?"

Tacita nodded. "*Semamitan*, they are called," she said. "It is an Ulusian phrase. It means *silent beings*. The Lydians told us they were shadow forms, dark spirits banished from the great spirit tree of reincarnation. They believed much of the same folklore and mythology as the Ulusians. *Semamitan* were forced to live in the mountains. They stole sheep, burlagh, even children sometimes."

Odhran turned back toward the cloud of approaching objects. He felt that momentary shiver within his mind again, almost like something prodded at him with a fair amount of restless insistence, and this time, he lowered his head, squinting reflexively as he saw a sudden dazzle of golden light dance before his eyes. It was as if he had turned headlong toward the sun instead of riding astride his bergelmir with his shoulders and spine turned to face the dawn.

Odhran Frankley?

His eyes flew wide again at the sound of the voice. *That is not Tacita*, he thought, feeling the hairs along the back of his neck rise in sudden alarm. *What in the duchar...?*

"Odhran?" Tacita asked. She pressed her heel against her bergelmir's flank, walking it alongside of his. "What is wrong?"

"I...I do not know," he said, touching his forehead. He glanced again at the cloud, the peculiar, winged things coming toward them, and he collapsed the scope between his hands, tucking it back into his saddle pouch. "It is nothing," he said. "Let us keep moving. Whatever those things are, I do not think I want to meet their acquaintance."

"Alright," she said, her expression caught between perplexed and worried. When he reined his bergelmir forward, she followed. When Odhran reached for his hip, curling his fingers about the butt of his an'daga and drawing the pistol from its holster, resting it

against his thigh as he rode, she did not say anything -- but she did not miss this subtle gesture, either.

He tried to make idle conversation as they rode along, not wanting to rouse any alarm in Tacita. He kept shooting wary glances at the horizon; he had deliberately turned the bergelmirs nearly due north, and the creatures aloft in the sky had mirrored their heading. *I will be damned*, he thought, letting his index finger fall against the brass hook of the an'daga's trigger. *They are following us.*

"When we get back to Tiralainn, I tell you, the first thing I am going to do is beg a pot of colcannon from Nelda, my mother's cook," he said. His voice was light, but his gaze was dark, his brows furrowed slightly. He did not need the scope to distinguish the forms now: wings in motion, flapping. *Whatever they are, they are bloody enormous*, he thought, and when he considered what Tacita had said about the semamitan -- giant predatory bats -- he shivered slightly.

"Colcannon?" Tacita asked. Her tone was mild enough, but she did not miss Odhran's anxiety -- or his uneasy glances toward the horizon. "What is that?"

"It is a pottage of sorts," Odhran said. "Root vegetables and tubers boiled together and mashed with stewed cabbage." He glanced at her. "Much better than it sounds. It is a traditional Elfin dish. I think the Mianach came up with it."

"Mianach," Tacita repeated, and he nodded.

"They are a northern Elf variety who bred with Abhacan. They are shorter than the southern Elves, the Gaeilge. They have shorter limbs, stockier bodies, like the Abhacan."

"Gaeilge Elves," Tacita murmured. "Aedhir's friend, Rhyden Fabhcun, was a Gaeilge Elf, was he not?"

Odhran nodded. "Gaeilge were once arboreal Elves -- they lived in trees. They are very tall, long-limbed. They have longer fingers and toes than we do. They used them for climbing." He glanced at her. "Rhyden Fabhcun was probably one of the most famous Gaeilge Elves who ever lived. He was a great hero in Tiralainn."

And I helped kill him, he thought, feeling dismayed shame stoke within him. He looked away from her, directing his gaze and his thoughts toward the horizon. The dark forms were moving very fast now, as though they had sensed Odhran's intentions to

draw north, away from them, and had quickened their pace, closing the distance between them.

“Why did he live in the Morthir, then?” Tacita asked.

“Who?” Odhran asked, frowning. By his best estimation, the wingspans of whatever the creatures were averaged at least forty feet across. The closer they came, the more clearly he could see them -- and the more he realized they sure as duchan looked like giant bats to him.

“Rhyden Fabhcun,” Tacita said. “If he was a great hero among your people, why would he leave his homeland? Why would he live in Torach?”

“Maybe he did not want to be a hero anymore,” Odhran said. He turned to her. “How fast can a bergelmir run?”

She raised her brows. “I do not know. Fairly swift, I am sure. They are very fleet-footed, from what I understand.”

“Good, then,” Odhran said, nodding once and glancing at the sky again.

“Why?” She looked past him, and gasped, her eyes widening when she realized how near the creatures had drawn.

“Because we are going to outrun them,” Odhran replied.

She nodded, frightened, and when he kicked his heels against his bergelmir’s ribs, spurring it into a sudden, swift lope, she followed in close step. The two weasels raced north across the Eng plains, their broad paws slapping nimbly against the frost-crusted, snow-dusted ground. The bitter wind whipped in their faces, and Odhran lowered his head, squinting as his eyes watered and his breath was snatched from his mouth. He hunkered over the weasel’s scruff, clinging tightly to the reins with one hand, the pistol with his other. He could hear the galloping patter of Tacita’s steed just to his right, slightly behind him, as the two bergelmirs bolted nearly alongside one another.

The bats were upon them like falcons swooping down on unsuspecting field mice. Odhran glanced over his shoulder. It was difficult to see, as the bergelmir undulated and jostled beneath him, but he could see the semamitan approach, their broad, outstretched wings. He blinked in bewildered fright, his vision blurred with tears, jarred by the weasel’s pace. *Hoah, is it just me, or are some of the damned things red*

and green? he thought, imagining flashes of color behind him -- sunlight against scarlet, green and cerulean -- as the bats descended.

“Tacita, go!” he screamed, raising the pistol, pivoting in his saddle. “Kick it hard! Go! Go!”

He could not see, or hold his arm steady enough to draw aim, but he fired anyway. The an’daga roared, a belching cloud of smoke and sparks spewing from the barrel as the butt slammed against his palm. He shoved the empty pistol deep into its holster, and reached behind him, his fingers fumbling as he hurried to unfetter one of the rifles.

A dozen enormous shadows swooped over his head, low enough and fast enough to slap him with a backlash of swift wind. Odhran yelped as he hunched his shoulders, ducking. Tacita cried out in startled fright, hunkering in her saddle. “Odhran, what are they?” she screamed.

“Semamitan!” he cried back, sitting up in his saddle, drawing the rifle to his shoulder. Again, he could not see or hold steady enough to aim, but he caught a horrifying glimpse of at least twenty other gigantic, winged creatures darting over his head, with broad wingspans that blocked the sun fleetingly in their passage, and long, whip-like tails that dragged in the air behind them. He saw black bellies and hooked rear talons -- enormous, wicked-looking claws splayed and poised, as if to grasp at them and he closed his finger against the rifle trigger, wincing at the thunder of its discharge, feeling the brass-adorned butt kick him mightily in the joint of his shoulder.

“Keep running!” he screamed at Tacita, even as she cried out again, jerking back on her reins, drawing her bergelmir to a skittering halt. Odhran looked ahead of them and his eyes flew wide.

“Sweet Mother in frilled knickers -- !” he cried, falling back in his saddle, drawing on the reins with all of his might. He felt the bergelmir’s hindquarters scramble for uncertain purchase as it staggered to a sliding halt, cleaving deep troughs in the frozen ground with its heavy paws.

The semamitan had landed in front of them -- more than thirty of them had dropped to the ground, blocking their passage ahead. “Go right,” Odhran cried at Tacita,

tossing his empty rifle to the ground and wrenching the other loose from his saddle. “Go right! Turn it right -- !”

He turned to the right and his voice faltered. More semamitan had landed here; the great, hulking beasts dropped gracefully from the sky and surrounded them. Odhran jerked on his reins, turning his bergelmir in a tight, prancing circle, staring at the creatures in bright, stricken horror. There were at least seventy flocked around them and hundreds more swooped and circled overhead.

“Hoah, shit,” he whispered, thrusting the isneach forward, pointing it at the beasts each in turn as his bergelmir danced and circled. *What in the duchan are these things?* he screamed within his mind. *These are not bats! These are not bloody rot damn bats!*

The creatures were indeed multicolored; it had been no trick of the sun, or his eyes. There were scarlet ones, green ones, black ones and blue, the hues of their respective hides brilliant in the bright light of the day. These were no oversized, winged rats. These creatures had no fur or feathers and their skin looked nearly pebbled in texture to Odhran’s gaze. They had no front legs; their forelimbs formed their wings, while they supported their weight upon massive, powerful back haunches. Each rear foot equipped with the sets of vicious talons he had observed already. Their necks were thick and long, supporting enormous heads that were shaped almost like a horse’s. Their pates tapered, arcing back beyond their skulls in magnificent, tubular crests.

“What the...?” Odhran whispered, his bergelmir turning again and again. He jerked the other an’daga from his hip, and he held his arms extended in opposite directions, shoving the opposing pistol and rifle barrels at the creatures. He blinked in new shock as one by one, the beasts began to shrug their shoulders, dropping their wings toward the ground, using heavy, hooked claws at the primary joint as forefeet. As their heads lowered, their shoulders rolling forward, Odhran could see men astride the animals, at least two per beast; hundreds of men astride hundreds of the creatures. “What in the duchan?” Odhran gasped, his throat constricted, his voice a tiny, breathless huff of air. “What in the duchan are they?”

Tacita was motionless in her saddle, making no move for her own weapon. Her eyes were enormous -- but with wonder, not fright. “They are dragons,” she whispered, and Odhran blinked at her, stunned.

“What...?” he gasped. “They cannot be. They cannot. That...it is just lore...legends and stories. It...they cannot be...!”

Odhran, he heard the voice say in soft beckon again, and he whirled his bergelmir around sharply, shoving the rifle ahead of him in frantic alarm.

“Who are you?” he shouted, staring among the men as they remained astride their monstrous steeds, watching him with silent, stoic impassivity. “Who are you?” Odhran screamed again, his voice hoarse. “What do you want with us? How in the bloody *duchan* do you know my name?”

“Odhran, it is me,” he heard someone say, and when he turned, he saw one of the men dismounting from one of the black dragons. A woman and a young boy rode astride the beast with him, but made no effort to follow as he slid down the dragon’s broad breast, his boots landing nimbly against the ground. He turned and began to walk toward Odhran, a tall, long-legged man with a fur-trimmed hat and a long scarf wrapped about his face, his mouth, obscuring his features from Odhran’s view. He carried a very lethal looking sword fettered to his hip -- some kind of broad, curved blade Odhran had never seen before. At his approach, Odhran spun the rifle against his hand, flipping it over, swinging the barrel to point in tandem with his pistol at the man’s head.

“Do not come any closer!” he shouted. “Who are you? What do you people want with us?”

The man paused, coming to a halt. He moved his hands slowly, and when Odhran jerked the *isneach* slightly, demonstratively, the man presented his palms to Odhran. “I will not hurt you, *a’leaid*,” he said, and Odhran blinked, visibly recoiling at the lilting word.

Gaeilgen? he thought, confused. *What in the duchar...? Did he just speak Gaeilgen to me?*

“Who are you?” Odhran yelled, poising his index fingers against the triggers of his guns.

The man moved his hands, slipping his hat from his head, revealing a headful of cropped, pale blond hair beneath. He hooked his fingertips against the edge of his scarf and lowered it from his face. It took Odhran a long, bewildered moment before he realized; before his grips against his weapons slackened and the pistol and rifle slipped

from his hands, tumbling to the ground. His eyes widened, and he lost his breath somewhere between his gut and his throat.

“It...it is not possible...!” he breathed.

The man walked toward him again -- only it was not a man at all. There was no mistaking the tapered edges of his ears, or his face, now that recognition had slapped the wits and wind from Odhran. He was an Elf -- a Gaeilge Elf.

Probably one of the most famous Gaeilge Elves who ever lived, Odhran thought, stunned. He began to shudder, somehow finding his breath as he slid slowly, unsteadily from his saddle. “Lord...Lord Fabhcun...?”

It is not possible, he thought, even as Rhyden smiled at him, his eyes as filled with bewildered shock as Odhran’s own. *It is not possible. Eirik told us Rhyden was dead, killed with the Oirat at Qoyina Bay. It...it cannot be...!*

“It cannot be,” he whispered, standing beside his bergelmir, unable to move. “You are dead. It cannot be.”

Rhyden stopped in front of him, smiling. *It is me*, he said without opening his mouth, or uttering a sound. He spoke within Odhran’s mind -- here was the soft voice that had called to him -- and it was just as all of the legends had said, that Elves had once been able to speak to others with only their minds, to hear and sense the thoughts of those around them.

“Draiocht,” Odhran whispered. *Magic*.

“It is alright,” Rhyden said, his eyes swimming with sudden tears. “Hoah, lad, it is alright.”

Aedhir sat astride his bergelmir among the ranks of the Enghan Herr, watching the first hints of the sun’s glow blush against the horizon. He closed his eyes, the bitter wind whipping down from the foothills of the Urlug Mountains and ruffling the fur lined trim of his kyrtil.

“It is time,” Eirik said from beside him. The Herr cavalry rode in a specific order astride their respective steeds. The hav’elgar elk-riders formed the front rows of their broad formations, with bergelmir-mounted warriors positioned behind them. Rekkir infantry warriors formed the third layer, with horseback riders and the ram-mounted

Nordri archery brigades fanning out at the rear. Eirik and Aedhir had drawn their bergelmirs ahead of the ranks, riding among the towering elks at the lead of the Herr. From this vantage, they could see the sprawling landscape of the eastern Eng plains below them as they descended from the foothills of the Urlug. The Torachan army was visible now, thousands of men in silver-trimmed armor and scarlet uniforms overflowing along the horizon, a swarming mass of imperial soldiers to mark the boundary between Engjold and Ulus.

Aedhir's eyes grew wide as he first caught sight of them. "Hoah..." he breathed.

Eirik nodded grimly, his brows drawn.

"I thought you said a legion had withdrawn," Aedhir said.

"It did," Eirik replied. "Two days ago, cohorts started pulling back toward Kharhorin. Three thousand bellatori, by our scouts' estimations."

Aedhir raised his brows, unable to tear his eyes away from the sight of the imperial army. "Still leaves a rot damn lot of them, does it not?"

"It does indeed," Eirik said.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Aedhir asked.

Eirik had signed the Torachan's terms of surrender, much to the dissent and disapproval of the Motinn that had so fervently counseled his uncle to the contrary. Eirik represented the Konung among his people now; his word and will were law, whether they liked it or not. The Enghan culture was one based on honor in both deed and action above all else, and to disobey their Konung -- a man they considered to be elevated to nearly godlike status -- would be unconscionable. While most of the warriors followed Eirik by this reason alone, others had defied him, and entire battalions -- hundreds of men -- had abandoned the Herr for their homelands once again.

"No," Eirik admitted. He glanced at Aedhir, and the two managed to laugh together. "I do not think I will ever be sure. But I have to do this. There is no other way."

Aedhir reached out, clapping his hand against Eirik's shoulder. "I am with you."

Eirik raised his brow. "That makes two of us, then," he remarked, and Aedhir laughed again, shaking his head.

“Three of us,” Hamal said from Eirik’s left, drawing his gaze. Hamal rode astride the broad spine of his immense elk and leaned over in his saddle, extending his hand to Eirik. “And all of my kyn.”

“Thakk thu, fraendi,” Eirik said, clasping hands with Hamal. *Thank you, uncle.*

“My kyn, as well, Eirik Gerpir,” Illugi told him, reining his hafrik through the bergelmir ranks behind them. Eirik pivoted in his saddle and met the Nordri Hersir’s gaze for a long moment. “Lopt may have twisted the hearts of my sons, but mine remains steadfast with my Konung,” Illugi said. “Hvar thu leikar, munu Hildofar’kyn ey fylgja.” *Where you lead, may the Hildofar’kyn always follow.*

Eirik smiled. “I am grateful for it, Illugi,” he said.

As the Herr rode down from the last of the undulating foothills, no more than four thousand men by hav’rikar, hav’elgar, stallion and bergelmir, they could see a large group of imperial bergelmir riders break away from the ranks. At least one hundred men rode across the plains to meet them as they entered the lowlands of the Enghan steppes, and Hamal looked at Eirik, his brows drawn, his expression grim.

“Optio,” he said. The sun had begun to rise in full, spilling golden light across the landscape. Aedhir raised the blade of his hand to his brow to shield his eyes from the glare as he studied the group’s approach.

“Centurion tribunes,” Eirik said to him, also bringing his hand to his face. “They lead the legion divisions. There should be at least sixty of them and their Praetorius among them. The rest are bellatori cavalry.” He glanced at Aedhir. “We will surrender to them.”

“We should call the Fylkirar and Hersirar from the ranks,” Hamal said. “Summon the Motinn members and ride to meet them -- face them with honor together.”

“No, Hamal,” Eirik said. “I will ride to meet them alone. You rally the Motinn. Tell the Fylkirar and Hersirar to call their *huscarls* to the front of the ranks.”

Hamal blinked, startled. The huscarls among each kyn’s Rekr were the most experienced of warriors. These were the men in line for Styrimathr and Fylkir leadership positions as those ahead of them were injured or killed in battle, the equivalents of non-commissioned officers in the Crown Navy, Aedhir had surmised.

“Gerar that, Hamal,” Eirik said quietly. *Do it, Hamal.*

Hamal nodded once, his expression still bewildered. “Ja, Eirik,” he said. Yes.

“Fall back among the a’Mithal,” Eirik said to Aedhir. “The bergelmir’folk. Keep among them.”

“You sure you do not want some company, Eirik?” Aedhir shifted his weight on his hips, draping his hand lightly against the butt of his an’daga, holstered at his belt.

Eirik met his gaze and the corner of his mouth lifted wryly. “Not this time, Aedhir,” he said. “This one is mine to see through.”

“Hreysti ok heithr, Eirik,” Aedhir told him. *Courage and honor.*

Eirik’s smile widened, and he nodded at Aedhir. He kicked his heels against his bergelmir’s flank, and the weasel leaped forward, loping ahead of the Herr forces and toward the approaching Optio. His long hair was drawn back from his face in a series of braids that slapped against his shoulders as the animal galloped. His breath streamed behind him in a frosty haze, and his brows furrowed against the golden glow of the new sun as he neared the imperial centurions.

“Hreysti ok heithr,” he whispered. *Courage and honor.*

Chapter Seventeen

Eirik rode headlong toward the approaching bellatori and centurions. As he drew near, the soldiers fanned out to greet him, reining their bergelmirs into a broad, imposing line. Eirik eased back on his reins, and his bergelmir slowed to a halt to face them. He looked among the soldiers, turning his head and meeting each of their gazes in turn as his bergelmir shuffled its paws restlessly beneath him, grinding its teeth against the metal plate of its bit and shaking its shoulders.

The bellatori cavalry all wore silver plate armor strapped over their red uniforms. Their domed helmets reflected pale sunlight, and they rode with large shields against their arms and long, sturdy spears in their hands. The Torachan officers were more resplendently dressed, in their finest embroidered scarlet great coats and polished jackboots, their faces powdered and rouged, their cravats and wigs impeccably arranged, their tricornes perched at perfect angles atop their pates. Centurions did not ride into battle with their soldiers. Imperial officers lingered in the background in relative safety as they murmured together in counsel, outlining strategies and sipping tea while their subordinates fought and died.

“Who are you, sir?” one of the soldiers demanded of Eirik as the centurions looked at him, their expressions collectively smug with superior contempt. “Identify yourself.”

Eirik leveled his gaze at the officer with the most elaborately adorned coat and hat. He had never been quite certain how ranking order among centurions was determined, but it had been his observation that whichever man among the soldiers had the most gold embroidery, braided cords and gaudy tassels affixed to his uniform was the senior-most among his fellows. “I am the Konung of Engjold,” he said to the centurion.

“Konung Fjolnir Itreker,” said the officer, nodding in polite salutation. “Greetings to you, sir. I am Lord Oppius Aebutius Isatis, Primipilus Centurion in the service of the Torachan Empire.”

Eirik averted his gaze, frowning as he looked among the Optio. "Where is your Praetorius?"

"Lord Paulus is in Kharhorin, sir," Isatis said. "He has entrusted us to the affairs of the day. I assure you, sir, we are capable of the task."

His tone was polite enough, pleasant even, but the Primipilus Centurion regarded Eirik as something distasteful he might have discovered smeared against his boot heel. His eyebrows had been plucked to near non-existence, his lips outlined meticulously with scarlet cosmetics, and stained to a bloody hue with rouge. He had a rather sizeable nose, and he held his head at such an angle as to require him to gaze disdainfully down the considerable length at Eirik.

"Where are the Seggr you have taken from us?" Eirik asked.

"They remain in Kharhorin, as well, sir, under my Praetorius' guard," Isatis replied. His thin brow arched slightly. "As was outlined in our correspondence, Konung Itreker. They will be returned to you once your Herr has been disarmed and disbanded."

"How do I know they are still alive?" Eirik asked. "Unharmd?"

Isatis met his gaze evenly. "I suppose you do not...except to hold me at my word that they are, and that they will be returned to you as per our agreement. You signed the terms, Konung Itreker, if I might remind. Now is hardly the occasion to attempt renegotiations."

Eirik's brows narrowed. "How do we do this, then?"

"Readily enough," Isatis said. "We shall see to it from here."

He motioned to the group of soldiers and officers around him, and knocked his heels against his bergelmir's ribs. The weasel moved forward, the Optio and bellatori riding toward the Herr ranks. They reined their steeds, passing Eirik as though he was little more than a tree sprouting inconveniently in their path. From the heavy ranks of the legions ahead of him, Eirik watched several imperial centuries begin to break away from the others, hundreds of soldiers on foot, bergelmir or horse. They drew large wheeled carts with them in which to collect the Enghan's weapons and steeds.

Eirik turned his bergelmir and kicked its flank, loping it after the centurions. As he followed, he could hear Isatis shouting out to the Herr, his voice sharp and loud in the cold morning air. "You will break apart by kyns!" he called. "Each of you -- rank and file,

collected by kyn order. Remain astride your steeds until the Centurion Stratorum and his men come to claim them from you. You will surrender your weapons and armor in orderly fashion. Any attempts to resist or flee will result in immediate execution. We have archers at the ready.”

“Break apart by kyns!” shouted other bellatori riding among the Optio. They galloped their bergelmirs, racing in criss-crossing, parallel courses to the front line of the Herr. “Break apart now -- all of you by kyn. Keep a full arm’s width from one another, twenty paces between each kyn! Do it now!”

The Enghan did not move. Eirik drew his bergelmir alongside of Isatis’, reining the weasel to a skittering halt on the frost-cruste d ground. “Most of my Herr do not speak *adlocutio*, the Torachan tongue,” he said.

“When I want your counsel, Konung Itreker, I will ask for it,” Isatis said without turning to him. He flapped his fingertips in the air. “Kindly follow my instructions and return to your kyn group. Assist with the orderly dissemination of your ranks.”

“They are not moving,” one of the Optio muttered, frowning. “Why are they not bloody moving?”

“Break apart now!” shouted the bellatori, still running their bergelmirs back and forth. Their angry, somewhat befuddled cries overlapped. “Are you bloody rot deaf? Move your asses -- break apart now!”

“They do not understand your orders,” Eirik said again to Isatis. “They do not understand what you are telling them.”

“Ignorant rot barbarians,” one of the Optio said, turning his face and spitting. Isatis frowned. “Bloody rot it all,” he muttered. He looked among his officers. “Who here speaks Enghan?”

The Optio blinked at one another, and looked around, wide-eyed and stupefied. Isatis’ frown deepened. “One man,” he said. “Does not one man among you speak this rot guttural dialect of theirs? How long have you people been stationed here?”

“My lord,” Eirik said, drawing Isatis’ irate and scathing glare. “I would be glad to address my Herr on your behalf.”

Isatis glowered at him for a long moment.

“It would be best that way, surely,” Eirik said. “I am their Konung. They would listen to me more readily than any imperial soldier. Let me call my Fylkirar and Hersirar forward -- our kyn leaders. They will pass my word swiftly back through the ranks, and their men will heed them.”

Isatis said nothing for a long moment, visibly fuming. One of his subordinate officers leaned toward him. “My lord, that seems a wise choice given the circumstances.”

The furrow between Isatis’ brows cleaved all the more as he spared the centurion a dark glance. “What would have been wise, Centurion Figulus, is that one among you might have taken the initiative to learn their rot damn language,” he seethed. “What measures did you think we would employ today, you witless buffoon -- bloody hand gestures? Shadow puppets against the tundra?”

He turned to Eirik, his shoulders hunched with enraged tension. “You will repeat every word I say precisely as I say it,” he snapped. “You will instruct your kyn leaders to relay my messages in exact and meticulous detail. Any discrepancies or troubles that come to pass because of miscommunication will be upon your head to answer for, Konung Itreker. I want this to be a swift, orderly and peaceful affair.”

“As do I, my lord,” Eirik said. “It is my people who are surrendering, after all.”

Isatis snorted. “Yes, well, then,” he said, and he flapped his hand again. “Come. You will give them my directions.”

Eirik nodded. “Yes, my lord,” he murmured.

The two rode side by side, approaching the Herr ranks. Isatis drew his bergelmir to a halt and turned to Eirik. “Call your kyn leaders forward,” he said. “Tell them to break their ranks apart by kyn and to keep a full arm’s width from one another. I want twenty paces between each kyn so that my bellatori can pass easily among them.”

Eirik looked across the broad line of hav’elgr riders. “Fylkirar!” he shouted out loudly. “Hersirar! Hroerith fram! Hroerith huscarlar fram!” *Move forward! Move your huscarls forward!* He caught sight of Hamal and met his uncle’s gaze. “Svinfylka!” he cried.

Hamal blinked at this, his eyes widening slightly. “Svinfylka!” Eirik shouted again, and Hamal nodded once, the corner of his mouth hooking in a sudden smile. “Hroerith fram -- svinfylka!”

The Herr began to move, with hav’elgrar riders spurring their gigantic steeds into motion, the ranks of bergelmirs and infantry behind them moving in tandem. The leaders of each kyn had already been drawn to the fronts of their respective divisions per Eirik’s instruction and he watched now as the a’Mithal Fylkirar began to ease their elk forward. Each mounted regiment fell into place behind their leaders, until the hav’elgrar riders formed a jagged line, sections of cavalry punctuated by the Fylkirar at the lead, like the point of a broad arrow. The bergelmir’folk filed in behind the elk, keeping to their established order as their Fylkirar rode to the fronts of their groups. Behind them, the infantry warriors gathered by kyn, and behind them, the horse-riders and hav’rikar of the Nordri tribes remained, all of them segregating into delineated ranks by kyn, all of them arranged into forward sweeping formations.

As the Herr repositioned themselves, Isatis marched his bergelmir along the front line of their ranks, his chin lifted haughtily, his brows pinched as he inspected their progress. “All of your weapons and armament now belong to the empire,” he called out to them. “Your steeds, as well. Each of you will surrender your animals to my soldiers as they move among you, collecting them. You will not dismount your beasts until prompted to do so by imperial command.”

He glanced at Eirik, expecting translation. Eirik looked toward Hamal again, holding the other man’s gaze. “Her er hreysti, mest gripr af gumi,” he called out to the Herr. *Here is courage, the most precious possession of man.* He did not translate Isatis’ demands; he offered his people the words of Olvir, the *skald’mikli*, or great poet of their ancestors, and they understood. He felt the weight of their startled gazes as nearly four thousand Enghan blinked at him in simultaneous surprise and comprehension. “Her er mestr laun drengr freistar vinna -- naer verr standa sinn fold gegn geirrarir af sinn fjandi, eigi meth aethra etha nauthsyn flyja ok meth hugrakkr ok hvatr hjarta.” *Here is the greatest reward a young man tries to win -- when a man stands his ground against the spears of his enemy without fear or desire to flee and with a brave and able heart.*

“Each of you will surrender your weapons to a *custos armorum*,” Isatis declared. “They will pass among your ranks with carts. Tender each and all swiftly and without complaint. We will search each man individually if need be.”

“Latar hann ey vegar herthr at herthr meth sinn kyn, andlit at andlit gegn sinn fjandi,” Eirik called. *Let him always fight shoulder to shoulder with his clan, face to face against his enemy.* “Drengar, vega ok althri benda at aethra. Bua thinn hjarta meth hreysti ok heithr, ok eigi hugsa thinn fjor naer thu horfa fjandiarnir.” *Young men, fight and never bend to fear. Make ready your heart with courage and honor, and forget your life when you face the enemy.*

“Any man among you who stands against us will be punished!” Isatis said. “Any man who resists or tries to flee will be summarily executed.”

“Lata oss vega fyrir varr byggth ok deyjum hraeddrat bjarga var barnar!” Eirik shouted. *Let us fight for our settled lands and die unafraid to save our children.*

The elk began to lower their heads toward the ground, as if all of the animals all at once decided to snuffle and graze in the frost-covered witchgrass. As their massive snouts dropped, presenting their armor-capped brows and foreheads to the centurions, their broad antlers began to overlap.

“What are they doing?” Isatis asked, glancing back at his Optio, his expression uncertain.

“It is a gesture of deference,” Eirik told him. “It is an ancient practice among my people, my lord...something passed to us for generations from our ancestors.”

“Hoah,” Isatis said with a nod and a bewildered expression. “Well, then...” He turned toward the Herr again. “You are *dediticius* now,” he declared. “Each of you a prisoner of the Torachan empire. You will be treated in accordance with strict protocol that will ensure that as long as you obey our directives in a timely and cooperative fashion, no harm will come to any of you.”

“Thar ek se mik fathir,” Eirik called out to the Herr. *There do I see my father.* Now he recited the Rekk *bardagi’boen* -- the traditional battle prayer -- and he watched Hamal lower his face respectfully, as did all of the Rekk cavalry within his gaze. “Thar ek se mik mothir ok mik systira, ok mik borthira -- allr af mik folk apt at allfyrstinn!” *There*

do I see my mother and my sisters and my brothers -- all of my people back to the very first.

“Thau kalla at mik!” Eirik cried. *They call to me!* “Thau maela koma i bland theirra i hollana af Vanaheim hvar hugtakkarnir lifa ey!” *They say to come among them in the halls of Vanaheim where the brave live always.*

Isatis nodded, pleased by Eirik’s seeming translations, and by the Herr’s apparent submission. “Hoah, and tell them the empire thanks them for their cooperation,” he said, flapping his hand dismissively.

Eirik looked at Hamal again. The two men locked eyes and Eirik raised his fist in the air. “Hreysti ok heithr!” he shouted. *Courage and honor!*

Hamal raised his fist. Every hav’elgr rider -- more than five hundred of them spread out before Eirik -- lifted their fists skyward. Beyond the tall shoulders of these massive steeds, Eirik could see the bergelmir’folk raised their fists, and the infantry warriors, the Nordri riders beyond them. “Hreysti ok heithr!” Eirik shouted again, as Isatis and the bellatori turned to him, puzzled.

“Hreysti ok heithr!” the Herr screamed out, their voices blending together in a thunderous, resounding roar. Isatis cringed in his saddle and the Optio and bellatori simultaneously shrank, their bergelmir scuttling backward in startled alarm.

The Herr surged forward, the elk suddenly charging the Torachans. They lifted their heads enough as they plowed forward to lock their antlers together, the broad spans overlapping into a formidable wall. As they charged, elk-riders drew the others in a sweeping V-shape behind them, shielding the remaining cavalry and foot soldiers and forming a *svinfylka*, or boar’s snout, an ancient attacking formation that the Enghan Herr had employed for thousands of years against enemy forces.

The elk thundered upon the centurions in eight massive *svinfylka* arrangements. Isatis did not even have time to scream; his head whipped toward Eirik, his eyes flown wide in stunned disbelief and then the leading edge of the antler wall slammed into his bergelmir, throwing it backward. Eirik lost sight of the centurion beneath a sudden, heaving surge of armor-plated elk and stampeding, pounding hooves.

“Hreysti ok heithr!” Eirik bellowed, jerking against his reins and whirling his bergelmir around to join the charge as it rushed past him. He wrenched his long-

handled ax from his saddle and brandished it above his head, kicking his bergelmir and spurring it to race along with the hav'elgrar.

"Do you think they are still alive?" Eirik had asked Aedhir. It had been the day before he had signed the surrender and sent it back to Kharhorin. He and Aedhir had held quiet counsel together inside of Eirik's tent and his eyes had been filled with sorrow as he had spoken. "Do you think the empire will let them go?"

"They will if you let me go to them," Aedhir had said. Eirik had looked at him, opening his mouth to protest, and Aedhir had held up his hand, staying his friend's objection. "Eirik, listen to me. You may have the power of the Konung now, but the deal with the empire has already been brokered. There is nothing you can do to change that, even with Arinbjorn gone. They have set this in motion, and there will be no undoing it -- unless you let me ride to Ulus."

"There has to be another way," Eirik had said, frowning.

"They are alive, Eirik," Aedhir had said, his eyes filled with desperate implore. "Aelwen, Pryce, Einar -- all of the Seggr -- they are alive. They are alive enough for Einar to have written to Fjolnir -- alive enough that at least for awhile, Pryce was able to convince them that he was your son. If the empire let them live that long, they obviously consider them all worth more drawing breath than dead. If they did not kill them straight away, they must still serve some purpose to the empire, have some value. They are still alive."

"That does not mean that you must -- " Eirik began.

"The empire has no intention of giving them back to you," Aedhir said. "Whatever purpose they have in mind for them, it is not returning them to Engjold. You know that as much as I do, so do not pretend otherwise. The empire's plan is fixed in their mind. They do not care about our children. They do not care about Engjold or whoever winds up with the throne when they are finished here. All they care about is black powder. That is all they want."

Eirik looked at him, pained.

"Let me go to them," Aedhir said. "Nothing will change the balance they have bartered in their regard -- nothing but me. If I reach them before the fourth morning, if I

offer them the formula for black powder, and the technology of my weapons, I can get them to agree to a new deal. My deal.”

Eirik stood, shaking his head. His brows narrowed as he turned away from Aedhir, and his hands closed into fists.

“You have nothing they want, Eirik,” Aedhir said. “Nothing they have not already been promised by the Nordri Hersirsons. But I do. There is no other way. No one else can see this through but me. We are running out of time. If I do not leave tonight, I will not reach them in time. I can still make it to the border and I can speak to their Praetorius without going all of the way to Kharhorin.”

Eirik was quiet for a long moment, his back turned toward Aedhir.

“You know I am right,” Aedhir said, rising. “Please, Eirik.”

“On the night Fjolnir died, he came upon me at a hav’elgrar corral,” Eirik said quietly. Aedhir blinked at him, caught off guard by the seemingly inapt comment. “He told me he remembered stories from his youth of how our hav’elgrar’folk used to defend against attacks from dragonriders.” He glanced over his shoulder toward Aedhir. “I remember those stories, too. My father used to tell me when I was a boy. Bedtime fodder.” He smiled somewhat sadly. “I would listen with wide-eyed wonder. It all seemed like myth to me, some fantastic and impossible time long ago, but wondrous still the same. The elk-riders would stand at the front of the Herr to face an oncoming assault. They would lower their heads, their antlers interlocking...”

Eirik held his hands up, lacing his fingers tightly together and presenting his palms to Aedhir demonstratively. “They would stand together, sweeping toward a lead rider -- the Fylkir -- and they would form an impenetrable wall -- a living, breathing, galloping battering ram. The other Herr would gather behind them -- bergelmir riders, infantry warriors, horsemen and hav’rikar. The elk would smash through any opposing shield wall and shelter my ancestors from any assaulting spear brigade. They would even fend off dragons as they swooped down from the sky, this mighty charge of my forefathers -- the svinfylka, they called it. Our legends say that Grimnir, the god of wisdom came among us and whispered it into the ears of our elk, teaching it to them.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Aedhir asked, puzzled. “Ancient lore will not get Einar back.”

“No,” Eirik agreed quietly. “It will not.”

“But I can,” Aedhir said.

Eirik turned to him. “You are wrong,” he said. “You are one man against an army, Aedhir. More than this -- you are one man against the empire. Whatever deal you barter with them will be meaningless, because no matter your knowledge of gersimi -- no matter your weapons -- you cannot hold them to their bargain. They can promise you whatever you want to hear. They can make you believe it, just as they made Arinbjorn believe he would be given Fjolnir’s crown, and when you have given them your secrets, your power over them will be gone. You will be one man against them and they will kill you.”

He met Aedhir’s gaze, his expression stern. “I am no longer one man against them. Now I have an army.”

“An army that is outnumbered,” Aedhir argued. “Yes, your scouts told you cohorts were withdrawing -- at least a legion abandoning the border, but that leaves two others, Eirik -- six thousand bellatori.”

“They outnumbered us in Sube,” Eirik said. “And we defeated them there.”

“You attacked them in the night at Sube,” Aedhir countered. “You tricked them there, Eirik, caught them by surprise.”

“Yes,” Eirik had replied. The corner of his mouth had lifted in a slow, wry smile. He walked toward a table against the far wall of his tent and lifted something from its surface: a piece of parchment -- the Torachan surrender demands.

“And maybe we will trick them -- surprise them -- again,” he had said quietly.

Eirik’s plan was simple: sign the surrender, lulling the empire into that false sense of security, and then attack them. He had told only Aedhir of his idea. He had let the rest of the Herr -- even his uncle, Hamal -- remain oblivious. Considering some of the kyn Hersirs had abandoned the Herr upon the news of the signed surrender, Aedhir suspected Eirik had not told them as a way to test their loyalty. Whatever the reason, it had worked. When he had called out the word *svinfylka*, the name of the ancient Enghan charge technique, and when he had uttered the rallying cry of the Rekk bardagi’boen, the Herr had understood -- and made ready.

“If we attack the empire, they will kill Wen, Pryce and Einar,” Aedhir had told Eirik.

“Not if we make it to Kharhorin first,” Eirik had replied.

“This is illogical, Eirik,” Aedhir had told him. “What you have planned will never work -- not in ten thousand tries. It is reckless, irresponsible, rash and dangerous.” He had raised his brow, his mouth unfurling in a wry smile. “Count me in.”

The bellatori who had broken away from the legions to approach the Herr did not stand a chance as the svinfylka lines charged. While some tried to turn their steeds and race back to their ranks, most simply stood their ground in a state of bewildered, stupefied shock and were plowed over by the rushing Herr cavalry. Those that were not pummeled aside by the shield wall of antlers were dispatched in swift and brutally efficient manner by the bergelmir riders and infantry sweeping in behind them.

Aedhir raced his bergelmir among the other a’Mithal riders, galloping behind the imposing shelter of the hav’elgrar ahead of them. He drew his an’daga in one hand, jerking loose the shaft of a long-handled ax fettered to his saddle with the other as they charged, and he watched in wide-eyed astonishment as Torachan soldiers and bergelmirs alike went flying through the air, tumbling like dried leaves tossed to a gale, plowed aside by the rushing elk.

It had been twenty years since he had last tasted of battle. He had always told Pryce it was addictive; the surge of adrenaline that would seize his form was a sensation unlike any other.

“Maybe that is why I am so reckless sometimes,” he had mused aloud to Pryce one night over brimagues aboard the *a’Maorga*. “Maybe that is why I get into pub brawls and mischief. Maybe I miss that rush...that intensity.”

Pryce had been enough into his brimague at the time to be blunt, and he had raised his brow at Aedhir. “Maybe you are just mad,” he had remarked, making Aedhir laugh.

There had always been terror when he would ride with the Fiainas into a fray; a man did not charge headlong toward his own potential death without a modicum of fear unless he was ignorant, crazy -- or both. But there had also been that breathless, searing thrill; that illusionary, fleeting moment of invulnerability that adrenaline granted,

and as Aedhir opened his mouth and bellowed along with the Herr cavalry, rushing the Torachan shield-line, he realized he had missed it, longed for it, like a man deprived of water surely longed for even a brief, taunting sip.

The legions remaining in the path of the charge braced themselves, infantry soldiers along their front raising an overlapping row of enormous, heavy shields to try and counter the Enghan's charge. Sunlight flashed against leveled spear points thrust over the shoulders of the shield bearers, but the Herr had the advantage of more than two tons of brawny, muscled elk behind each pair of interlocked antlers. The Torachan shield wall, braced in place only by men, did not have a whore's hope in a cathedral.

The two armies fell together with a thunderous din. Torachan soldiers filed at least twelve men deep went flying in all directions as the hav'elgrar plowed into their shield wall. Spears splintered, shattered and careened through the air as they smashed into the armored breasts and skulls of the elk. The air was filled with the roar of battle cries -- Torachan and Enghan alike overlapping -- as the elk riders drove into the imperial ranks, scattering them, forcing them to scramble backward.

It had been twenty years since the First Shadow War, but as Aedhir's bergelmir followed the other a'Mithal riders around him, springing into the air, bounding over the hav'elgrar and headlong into the sudden, violent fray, all of those old and half-forgotten instincts returned to him, reinfused as adrenaline and fear coursed through his veins. Aedhir folded himself over the bergelmir's scruff as the great weasel pounced. He spun the an'daga against his palm and as the bergelmir landed, its paws skittering for purchase, he drew his arm up and out, taking aim at the nearest Torachan and closing his finger against the trigger. The an'daga boomed; smoke blasted out of the barrel, and he saw the bellatorus wrench sideways, floundering, toppling to the ground.

There was no time to reload; Aedhir cast aside the weapon, reaching for another. He had holstered six of the pistols to his torso beneath his coat. He had strapped another five against his saddle, along with three rifles, all loaded and ready to fire. He caught a blur of movement out of the corner of his gaze, and whirled, swinging his ax in a broad arc, battering aside the proffered sword strike of a bellatorus infantryman. Aedhir let the ax shaft slip against his palm, whipping the blade around and then he swung it back again, clipping the soldier beneath the chin with the broad edge of the

blade. The soldier uttered a shrill, cawing sound and crashed to the ground, blood splattering in a wide arc.

Aedhir jerked another pistol from his belt and pivoted on his saddle as he kicked his bergelmir forward. In the midst of the melee, there would be no such thing as a poor shot, and little need for aim. He drew the hammer back against his thumb and squeezed the trigger, feeling the an'daga buck against his palm. Another Torachan to his left went flying backward, tumbling from the saddle of his bergelmir. Aedhir spun the pistol in his hand and drove the butt mightily down against the brow of a foot soldier who had launched himself at Aedhir's steed, meaning to wrestle him from his saddle. He heard the sickening crunch of shattering bone as the brass-tipped butt smashed into the soldier's skull, and then the man fell away, disappearing beneath a tangle of bergelmir paws and rushing feet.

Another blur of motion attracted his gaze, and he reined the bergelmir hard to the right. A Torachan rider was charging him, his broadsword drawn back to swing for Aedhir's gut. Aedhir kicked his bergelmir to a gallop and rushed the soldier head-on; he drew his ax up in a sharp arc, parrying the sword strike. He snapped the blade up again, and felt it catch the rider against the throat. The man squawked as the ax sheared through flesh, and he crashed backwards, flipping ankles over ass off his saddle. The ax blade had buried deep in his neck, nearly cleaving his head from his neck, and as his bergelmir rushed past Aedhir and the man fell from its spine, Aedhir felt the ax yanked along with him, jerked from his hand.

There was no time to lament the loss of the blade, and his hand darted for one of the rifles. He hooked his fingertip against the trigger as he snapped it loose of its bindings, and he drew the long barrel up before him, firing at another charging cavalryman. The blast caught the rider's bergelmir in the side of its face; it screeched and sprawled sideways, crashing against the trampled earth. Aedhir lost sight of it -- and its rider, who lay trapped beneath it -- as his bergelmir raced past.

He tossed the isneach slightly in the air, flipping it over and catching it by the barrel. He swung the rifle wide, driving the heavy wooden butt into a pair of infantrymen's heads. They fell together, their domed helmets clanging melodically, and

then they crumpled. Aedhir swung the rifle again, bashing another foot soldier in the chin, knocking his head back with the force of the blow.

“Aedhir!” he heard Eirik shout out, and he looked around wildly through the swarm of men and animals for his friend. His eyes flew wide as a bellatorus astride a bergelmir raced straight toward him, brandishing a spear between his fists, the iron tip bearing straight for Aedhir’s skull.

“Hoah -- !” he cried, jerking the isneach up between his hands. He pistoned his right hand forward just in time to drive the barrel of the rifle into the spearhead, battering it aside. As the two bergelmirs passed one another, he snapped his left hand out, driving the butt of the gun into the side of the rider’s head and sending him toppling.

“Eirik! Where are you?” he yelled, snatching an an’daga from his belt in his left hand. Two riders were plowing toward him; there was no time to dart around them. He drew the pistol up, tossing aside the isneach in his right hand and grabbing for a second an’daga. He fired; the first rider tumbled sideways from his saddle. He jerked his right hand around, cocking back the doghead and squeezing the trigger, sending the second Torachan crashing backward, shot nearly square between the eyes.

Eirik had done his best to try and convince Aedhir to remain with the Seggr at the Enghan encampment, but Aedhir would have none of it. “I am not a lamb about to be dropped into the wolves’ den,” he had told Eirik. “I have been through battles -- through war -- before. I know how to hold my own.”

“Aedhir, this is not Tiralainn’s fight,” Eirik had said, trying to reason with him -- a feat Pryce might have told him was only wasted breath, had Pryce been around.

“It is impossible to argue with a man whose concept of logic apparently lies buried somewhere up his ass,” Pryce had said of Aedhir once.

“No,” Aedhir had told Eirik. “It is not Tiralainn’s fight, but by my breath, Eirik, it is mine.”

He caught sight of Eirik in the crowd, swinging his ax, his long plaits streaming behind him as his bergelmir charged. He promptly lost sight of Eirik again, along with his grip on the isneach he had just grabbed as a Torachan rider leaped from behind Aedhir, tackling him, knocking him sideways off his bergelmir.

Aedhir twisted as he fell, his legs tangling with the soldier's. He grunted, the breath rattled from him as he slammed into the dirt. He managed to roll onto his back, feeling the soldier's thighs clamp against his hips as he sat up, straddling Aedhir. There was a wink of sunlight off of steel as the soldier clasped his sword between his hands, rearing it back to drive into Aedhir's face, and Aedhir's eyes flew wide.

"Hoah -- !" he yelled, drawing his hands reflexively toward his head, jerking his knees toward his belly. He felt the soles of his boots smack against the soldier's gut and he kicked the man away from him. The soldier fell away, grunting breathlessly, and Aedhir swung his legs up, rolling his hips and spine in turn from the ground, landing nimbly on his toes.

The Torachan scrambled to his feet, his sword still clutched in hand and he rushed at Aedhir, his mouth twisted in a sneer. Aedhir danced back, his hand darting for his sword. He wrenched it loose of its scabbard just as the Torachan lunged at him; Aedhir drew his sword up in a sharp arc between them, and there was a loud, metallic ringing as the two blades smashed together, crossing. Aedhir clasped his hilt in both hands and planted his feet as the soldier bore down against him, trying to throw him off balance.

Aedhir caught a glimpse of movement reflected from beyond his shoulder against the soldier's helmet; a blurred shadow rushing him from behind. Aedhir shoved his weight in full against his sword, staggering the young Torachan. Aedhir swung his hilt between his hands, brandishing his sword like a dagger and then he thrust it back, driving the blade past his hip. He caught the attacking soldier behind him in the gut, burying the blade, and he heard the sharp, startled intake of the man's breath at the blow.

The soldier in front of him regained his footing and charged at Aedhir again, screaming, spittle flying from his lips. Aedhir backpedaled, forcing his blade deeper into the belly of the man behind him, and he kicked his foot up, catching the soldier in front of him in the groin. The soldier's eyes flew wide, his breath huffing from him in a hoarse gasp as Aedhir's boot heel mashed against his crotch, and then Aedhir punted him mightily.

Aedhir jerked the sword free from behind him and scuttled to the side as the injured bellatorus collapsed, crumpling to the ground.

“Aedhir!” he heard Eirik shout, and he jerked his head at the sound, spying his friend as Eirik loped his bergelmir through the throng toward him. Eirik cleaved a path for himself by leaning precariously to the side of his saddle, swinging his ax again and again, driving the heavy blade into any hapless Torachan who stumbled into his path. “Aedhir, jump!” Eirik yelled.

As Eirik’s bergelmir thundered past him, Aedhir pivoted, his hand darting out and hooking against one of Eirik’s saddle bags. He let the weasel’s forward momentum jerk him off of his feet. He twisted, kicking his leg up and swinging astride the animal behind Eirik.

“I thought you said you could handle yourself,” Eirik shouted, glancing over his shoulder and grinning. A Torachan rider charged at them on horseback, and Aedhir reached with his free hand for another an’daga, whipping the pistol from beneath his coat and firing at the soldier, sending him tumbling from his saddle.

“I said I could hold my own!” he yelled at Eirik with a laugh. “Never said anything about handling myself!”

He heard a whistling sound from overhead, a dim, shrill sound rising over the din of fighting, and he looked up. “Hoah -- whoa! To your left!” he cried, grabbing Eirik by the arm. “Left, left -- go left! Go!”

Eirik glanced up, jerking on his reins, turning his bergelmir sharply to the left. Just as the weasel veered, both men leaning over its flank, hunching their shoulders, four enormous boulders smashed into the earth directly before them -- and right where they would have been had Eirik not turned. The ground shook with the force of the impacts and Aedhir heard men shrieking as they were pinned or crushed by the falling stones.

“Grimnir have mercy!” Eirik cried breathlessly, his eyes enormous with shock.

Aedhir frowned as more boulders sailed over their heads, plowing into the ranks ahead of them. “Trebuchets,” he said grimly. “Those rot bastards. They are firing their trebuchets even if they hit their own men.”

A volley of arrows hissed through the air, raining down on them. Aedhir jerked, yelping in start as one struck within inches of his face, burying into Eirik’s shoulder,

sinking deep into the wool-lined paneling of his armor. Another punched into the bergelmir's rump, and more speared into the ground, smacking loudly.

"Hoah, they are lobbing everything at us now," Aedhir said, yanking the arrow loose from Eirik's shoulder. "What next? Putrefied cows?"

"Torachan longbows," Eirik said, frowning as Aedhir passed him the arrow. He snapped it in half against his palm and cast it aside. They both ducked as another round of arrows whipped overhead. "The hross'folk archery brigades behind us will volley back."

"Splendid," Aedhir muttered, flinching as the Herr returned the bow-fire, sending arrows flying across the sky into the Torachan ranks. "We will be skewered from both sides -- evens out that way."

Eirik kicked his bergelmir again, sprinting forward into the fray, swinging his ax again. Aedhir lifted his sword in hand as a seeming endless throng of Torachan bellatori closed in around them, rushing at them, and then he blinked, wincing as a sudden bright light dazzled before his eyes.

Aedhir

"What was that?" he asked, closing his eyes, pressing his hand against his brow.

"What was what?" Eirik asked, whipping his ax around in a broad arc to batter aside a Torachan spear thrust.

"That light," Aedhir said. He opened his eyes in time to see an infantry soldier darting toward them, the point of his spear shoved at Eirik's midriff. He pivoted in the saddle, wrenching his dagger from its sheath and letting it fly. The blade sank into the soldier's neck, just above the edge of his breastplate and he screamed, dropping his spear, his hands flapping as blood spewed from his pierced jugular. Aedhir turned his head as the bergelmir ran past him, watching the soldier topple to the ground.

"What light?" Eirik asked, leaning back sharply against Aedhir to avoid a sword swing aimed for his head. Aedhir grabbed the last pistol from his belt and fired, shooting the Torachan out of his saddle.

Aedhir, where are you?

He felt the voice more than he heard it; it seemed to come from somewhere inside of his mind, something warm, golden and glowing shuddering through him. The

dazzle of bright yellow light seared before his eyes again, and he cringed, shoving his hand against his forehead, crying out. *“That light!”*

“Are you alright?” Eirik asked, as his hand shot out, grasping another spear, wrenching it loose of the Torachan rider’s grasp as they passed one another astride their bergelmirs. Aedhir heard the startled yelp of the rider as his steed darted past. Eirik spun the spear shaft against his palm, hefting it and letting it fly into the rider’s back, punching between his shoulder blades.

“I hear something,” Aedhir said. He looked up, watching more boulders sail overhead. As he did, he saw the light again, brighter this time, and he recoiled. “Hoah -- !” It felt like something reached out and grasped him, an invisible hand dropping against the cap of his skull, touching him.

Aedhir, it is me.

“What in the duchan...?” Aedhir gasped, alarmed.

Aedhir, it is Rhyden.

Aedhir’s breath drew still. All at once, the world around him -- the battle, the screaming, clanging of steel, shrieking of horses and bergelmirs, the stink of blood -- it all faded. It felt as though Aedhir had just fallen headlong into a vat of glacial water; the voice -- the words -- had stripped the wits and wind from him.

Aedhir, it is me, said the voice inside of him again, the voice that emanated from the golden light. *It is Rhyden.*

“It...it is not possible...” Aedhir gasped. Eirik fell back in his saddle, tussling with a Torachan over the matter of a spear each of them had caught hold of, but Aedhir did not even blink as Eirik jostled into him, nearly sending him toppling from the saddle.

Aedhir, I am coming, Rhyden said. *We are coming.*

“I have lost my mind,” Aedhir whispered, and he could have sworn he heard Rhyden chuckle softly.

Your mind is not broken, Aedhir, he said. *It is awakening.*

“What in the duchan...?” Aedhir’s sword slipped from his hand as his fingers went limp.

Look up, Rhyden said. *Look up in the sky.*

Aedhir lifted his gaze and saw an enormous shadow swoop over them. He had never seen the likes in all of his days, and Aedhir was the sort of man who humored himself into thinking he had seen damn near everything. Whatever it was, it was large and winged, with a long neck and an even longer tail. It had hind feet draped in the air behind it, but no discernable forelimbs; its front feet, as it were, seemed to branch out into its broad wings.

“Mother Above!” he cried, shrinking instinctively, his eyes flew wide. “Eirik, look out!”

Eirik raised his eyes and yelped, hunching his shoulders as another of the beasts darted above them, and then another and another. Suddenly the sky was filled with the creatures, seemingly hundreds of them swooping down upon the battle. They emitted some sort of resonant, haunting cry with each pass; low, groaning notes that resounded in overlapping harmony like dirges above the din of the fray. “What in the name of the Regin...?” Eirik gasped.

Whatever the creatures were, they were no secret weapon of the empire. The Torachan soldiers saw them, too, and panicked with equal alarm and fervor as the Enghan. Their bergelmirs bucked and screamed as the beasts swept over them; like the Herr, the imperial foot soldiers scrambled about, their eyes flown wide with shock and terror, crying out in fear and confusion.

Aedhir watched in helpless astonishment as a barrage of trebuchet-hurled boulders flew toward one of the creatures. His eyes widened all the more as he saw the boulders freeze in mid-flight as they neared the animal; the stones poised, hovering in the air as if caught by an invisible hand, and then they hurtled back, shot across the sky, thrown at the trebuchets that had dispatched them.

“Mother Above,” he whispered.

Arrows pelted at the creatures were likewise dispatched; hundreds paused as they speared through the sky, only to be sent hurtling down toward the ground again. They seemed to be aimed somehow deliberately for the Torachans. Aedhir jerked, startled, as he felt the whip of wind through fletchings against his face, and a dozen or more arrows whistled past him, punching into bellatori foot soldiers.

“What are they?” Eirik cried, ducking over his saddle as one of the beasts -- this one a vibrant shade of red -- swooped over his head, near enough to send his hair flapping into his face with its rush of wind.

Aedhir ducked, too, turning his head over his shoulder to see the animal snatch a hapless imperial infantryman -- bergelmir and all -- between its powerful back talons, and carry the soldier and steed screaming and thrashing skyward. Another dove down toward the ranks; ahead of it, as if shoved by an invisible wall, Torachan soldiers went flying, bergelmirs, soldiers and horses careening in all directions, battered aside.

“I do not know,” Aedhir said. As the red creature swept into the sky again, he saw two men sitting on its back. The men leveled stout-armed bows at the imperial ranks and fired arrows. “But whoever they are, I think they are on our side.”

One of the animals, its hide a brilliant green hue, swooped down so near to Eirik and Aedhir that they could see the intricate details of its head. Its skull swept back into an elongated, tapered crest of some sort. Here was the source of the loud, mournful keening; the animals exhaled air through an opening at the top of the crest, emanating the cries.

Aedhir caught another glimpse of men astride the beast, another pair of archers who turned their attentions and their arrows toward the Torachans, and then it flapped its wings, buffeting Aedhir and Eirik with powerful wind, and swooped skyward again, as graceful in flight and motion as any eagle or hawk.

“They are fighting against the Torachans,” Aedhir said, incredulous. He hooked his hand against Eirik’s arm, squeezing tightly in his excitement. “Eirik, look! They are fighting the Torachans!”

“Then let us lend them a hand,” Eirik said, kicking his bergelmir, spurring it forward again. He charged headlong into the crowd, drawing his ax back in his fist, a hoarse, furious battle cry shrieking from his mouth.

Within little more than an hour, it was over. The imperial legions, their ranks decimated and disintegrated, turned and fled from the Enghan border. Not many survived the combined ferocity of the Enghan Herr and their new-found allies, but those Torachans who did bolted back into Ulus, abandoning the fray by the hundreds.

Aedhir had taken a deep spear blow to his hip, a lucky shot by a bergelmir-bound imperial cavalryman that left him bleeding profusely, and limping heavily as he swung himself down from Eirik's saddle in the aftermath of the battle. He looked around, blinking dazedly, feeling lightheaded from shock and blood loss, exhausted as the adrenaline that had infused his form, priming him for battle, waned within him. Everywhere he turned, he saw bodies sprawled on the ground, tangled heaps of men in torn scarlet uniforms and blood-soaked kyrtils. Arrows and boulders were strewn in all directions; broken spears, fallen swords and abandoned shields littered the ground. Fallen bergelmirs and injured horses lay among the mess and he could hear the groans and whimpers of hurting animals and men intermingling.

"Mother Above," he whispered, staggering. This was a part of war he had never found addictive; once the rush was over, all that a man was left with was this -- helpless shock and horror, the realization of his own brutal capacities, and the devastation that he had helped to wreak.

Eirik hopped down from his bergelmir. An arrow had caught him in the chest, grazing past his plates of hide armor over his shoulders. It was not a deep enough wound to risk his life, but it had left him bleeding nonetheless. He had also taken a fairly powerful blow or two in the head; his nose and mouth were blood smeared, and he stumbled dizzily, reeling. He saw a familiar face among the fallen -- one of Hamal's men lying pinned and moaning in pain beneath the crumpled heap of his slain hav'elgr, and cried out softly, moving to help him.

Aedhir stumbled about in place, watching the surviving Herr limp about in dazed, aching stupors. He lifted his gaze skyward, and saw the winged creatures spiraling slowly above them, like hundreds of gigantic vultures caught on a thermal draft, waiting for the dying to fully wane from this world. The animals began to drop toward the ground in pairs. He watched them glide gracefully toward the earth, their broad wings outstretched, their torsos canted as their rear talons reached tentatively for the blood-stained grass. They landed all about the battlefield, sending the Herr recoiling from their approach in bright new fear.

Aedhir limped toward the creatures, staggering and floundering over fallen corpses and dead animals. He had not heard Rhyden's voice within his mind anymore

or seen the golden light that had so dazzled him during the fray, and all at once, he wondered if he had simply imagined the whole thing; as if somehow, his mind had snapped in the midst of battle, and he had been hallucinating.

“Eirik?” he heard Hamal cry out, his voice hoarse. He turned and saw Eirik’s uncle stumbling across the battlefield, his face ashen with shock, his kirtill torn and bloodied, his axe still clutched in hand. Two arrows protruded from his back, wagging in the air between his shoulders like demonstrative fingers. He caught sight of Aedhir, and his eyes flew wide. “Aedhir! Where is Eirik? Is he...is he...?”

“He is alive,” Aedhir said. He pivoted, reeling clumsily as he pointed behind him. “He is over there, Hamal. I think he found one of your men, and he is trying to pull him loose.”

“Aedhir!” he thought he heard someone cry. He thought it was Hamal; he turned, thinking the Hersir had not heard him. He meant to call back to Hamal again, and blinked in confusion as he saw Hamal making his way toward Eirik, clearly having heard Aedhir’s direction.

“Aedhir!”

“What?” he asked, turning, staggering dazedly. He glanced at Eirik, but it was not his friend crying for help, either; Eirik was on his knees, wrestling with the dead elk, his teeth gritted, his brows furrowed as he struggled vainly to haul the beast’s immense dead weight from his fallen comrade.

“Aedhir!”

That sounds like Tacita, he thought, bewildered. He pressed his hand against his brow, closing his eyes. *Hoah, I have bloody lost it now. I am hearing Tacita calling for me.*

“Captain Fainne!” someone else called out, and Aedhir knew his mind was broken; it sounded like Odhran.

Mad, mad, mad... he thought, sinking to his knees. *Pryce, do you want to add anything to this while I have gone bloody rot mad?*

The Pryce in his head was quiet; instead, he heard Tacita again, closer now in the illusion. He imagined he could even hear the sounds of her footsteps, her boots as

she scrambled over fallen bodies and discarded weapons, rushing toward him. “Aedhir! Aedhir! Odhran, he is here! He is over here!”

He opened his eyes in time to see a blur of motion. He cried out, trying to scramble backward, his hand darting for the dagger he had thrown at an imperial rider during the battle.

“Aedhir!” the figure cried as it fell to its knees in front of him. He blinked in bewildered surprise at the familiar face, the blue eyes and tangled blond hair. Tacita reached for him, tears spilling down her cheeks, her hands outstretched.

Not possible, he thought, even as her fingertips brushed against his cheeks. *Not possible...this is not bloody possible...!*

“You are alive,” Tacita gasped, and she fell against him, throwing her arms about his neck and shuddering. She kissed him, her lips dancing against his ear, his cheek, his mouth. “You are alive! He said he could feel you...he said he could sense you...but I...I did not...!”

“Captain Fainne!” Odhran cried, and now Aedhir’s madness was complete, as he saw the young midshipman stumbling over fallen forms and battered bodies, rushing toward him. “Captain Fainne!”

Odhran dropped to his knees beside Tacita, reaching for Aedhir. “Captain Fainne, you are alive, sir! I...I know he said it, but I...I...”

“What...” Aedhir gasped, blinking between them. “How...where did you...?”

“They brought us here,” Tacita said. “They came upon us as we were riding west. This morning -- we saw them this morning.”

“He told us they had seen you,” Odhran said, his voice overlapping Tacita’s in eager chatter. “Hoah, he said the boy...”

“Temu,” Tacita supplied.

Odhran nodded. “Yes, the boy, Temu -- he had seen you in his mind, and then he said he sensed you. He could feel your presence, but we...”

“We did not understand,” Tacita said. “We thought you rode to Kharhorin.” She hugged him again, clutching at him. “Why are you not in Kharhorin?”

“It is draiocht, sir,” Odhran said, hooking his hand against Aedhir’s sleeve.

“Surely it is magic! I heard his voice inside of my head. He told me he could sense me,

even from miles away, he could recognize how my mind...felt to him, and he spoke to me." Odhran tapped his fingertip against his brow. "I could hear him...see him like bright light, and then he came! It is some sort of draiocht, Captain Fainne -- like nothing I have ever seen! Like all of the legends, sir -- the sight. What they used to say about the sight!"

"What are you talking about?" Aedhir asked, completely baffled -- and completely convinced he was dying somewhere on the battlefield, his mind broken, his consciousness dissolved in hallucinations.

"We thought you were in Kharhorin," Tacita said again. "We kept trying to tell him, the both of us, but he said Temu had seen you with the Herr. He said he could feel you here."

"Who?" Aedhir asked.

Odhran blinked at him. "Why...why, Lord Fabhcun, sir. He..."

"Lord Fabhcun?" Aedhir whispered, his voice and breath abandoning him, as though he had just taken a swift blow to the gut.

"I keep telling him he can call me Rhyden," said a voice from behind Tacita and Odhran. Aedhir looked, and recoiled, his eyes flying wide.

"It...it is not possible...!" he gasped.

"He will not," Rhyden said, the corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile as he walked toward them. "His Crown Navy manners are too well-instilled, I think."

His hair had been shorn, as Tacita had said, but there was no mistaking his face, his smile, his lean, long-legged form. He was dressed in strange clothes; a longer, heavier version of the Enghan's kyrtil, with a hem nearly to his knees, and a scarf tucked beneath the fur lined edge of his collar. He wore peculiar boots strapped about his legs with intertwined straps of fabric; the toes of the boots hooked upward into tapered points.

Rhyden knelt, and Odhran leaned aside so that Aedhir could see him plainly. Rhyden reached out, clapping his hand against Aedhir's shoulder. "Beannacht, mo'cara," he said. *Hello, my friend.*

"It is not possible..." Aedhir said, and then he fainted.

Chapter Eighteen

Wen moaned in her sleep. Her soft voice, the movement of her hand, her body as she squirmed restlessly against Pryce roused him. He had been dreaming for some odd reason about Rhyden Fabhcun and a soft, golden glow, like a sunbeam spilling through draperies into a darkened room through which he could hear Rhyden Fabhcun's voice.

Pryce, Rhyden had said, the sensation of his words gentle and soothing within Pryce's exhausted, hurting, frightened mind. *Pryce, where are you? Open your eyes, lad. Show me where you are. Tell me how to find you.*

Wen's hand fluttered against his shirt, and she moved again, shuddering against him. "No, do...do not..."

"Wen," Pryce whispered, blinking groggily. He reached for her, touching her hand, folding his fingers against hers. They were still in the sublevel of the dragon shrine. He had no idea how much time had passed since their arrival, but surely, it had been hours. Most of the Seggr were asleep, curled together in huddles against the walls. The Minghan were awake, but quiet, sitting in clusters near the young boys, as if keeping protective vigil over them while they rested.

Pryce's touch, meant to comfort Wen, only seemed to distress her further. He felt her pull against him, trying to wrestle her hand free. "No..." she whimpered, her voice louder now, and filled with alarm. "No, no...!"

"Wen, it is alright," he said softly. He turned his face toward hers, letting his lips brush against her brow. She twisted away from him, startling him. She uttered a sharp, frightened cry that roused the sleeping Seggr nearby.

"Do not touch me!" Wen cried, scuttling away from Pryce, punting him with her feet. She drew back into the corner, shoving herself against the wall. Her eyes were open, flown wide with terror and panic, but her gaze was dazed, as if her mind was still more enfolded in sleep than consciousness.

At her cry, Coinin stirred. She had been snuggled against Faustus, sleeping with her head tucked against the nest of his lap, but she sat up at Wen's voice. "Wen!" she exclaimed, frightened and confused.

"Wen, it is me," Pryce said, rolling onto his knees, reaching for her. She recoiled at his proffered touch, slapping at him with her hands, a frantic light in her eyes, fear twisting her face.

"Wen, it is me. It is Pryce."

She blinked at him, as horrifying dreamscapes faded into waking, and the wild fear drained from her eyes, her face, waning into realization and shame. "Pryce?" She looked around and saw Coinin squirming against Faustus, who held her by the shoulders, restraining her. She saw the Seggr sitting up, looking at her in startled bewilderment. She blinked at Pryce again and began to tremble, tears filling her eyes, spilling down her cheeks. "Oh, I...I am sorry..."

Pryce went to her, enfolding her in his arms, and she shuddered against his shoulder. "I am sorry," she said again.

"Hush," Pryce whispered, pressing his hand against the back of her head, holding her tightly. He lowered his face, turning his cheek against her hair, kissing her. "It is alright, Wen. You are safe now."

Einar watched this quiet, tender exchange from across the room. "She needs him right now," Subetei said softly, drawing Einar's gaze. Einar wanted to go to Wen; he knew what had happened to her, and what she must have been dreaming of to terrify her so, and he wanted to comfort her somehow. Subetei knew this, and he smiled kindly, sympathetically at the boy. "She needs him," he said again, and he nodded at Pryce. "No one makes this better for her, but he holds her and she feels safe again. Only him."

"She is my friend, too," Einar said, his brows drawn.

"Her heart takes her where she needs to be," Subetei said. "She is no mule or necklace -- not property or prize. You think otherwise, treat her like that because of only what your heart wants -- and you are no better than the man who did this to her."

Einar blinked at him, his expression softening into sorrow. "I would never hurt Wen. I could never, Subetei. I...I love her."

"I know," Subetei said with a gentle smile. He reached out and touched Einar's cheek. "You love her best when you let her love another. One she wants to love."

Subetei drew his legs beneath him and stood. He looked down at Einar, holding out his hand to the boy. "Come on," he said. "Been some time now to pass. Maybe it is dark. We can go see."

They reached the top of the stairs and Subetei glanced at Einar, holding his fingers to his lips, a hushing gesture. "Guards do not come here once," he whispered. "This is sacred place for my people, the Khahl. But Khahl have been gone now. Tertius takes them, sends them from Kharhorin. Soldiers come to our place. They might come now."

Einar nodded wordlessly. Subetei reached up, feeling along the stone wall until he pressed against a point where a small panel of rock slid back into a recessed hollow. Einar heard the grinding of stone against stone, and he drew back. A narrow doorway opened before them, leading out into a candlelit chamber beyond.

Subetei leaned forward, poking his head out. After a moment, he turned to Einar. "You wait here," he said. Einar nodded again, and Subetei crept forward, moving cautiously, his shadow spilling before him against the polished granite floor.

Subetei was gone for a long, quiet moment, and curious, Einar tiptoed up to the top of the stairs. He peeked through the doorway, and his eyes widened in amazement. The chamber beyond the threshold was magnificent, adorned with enormous murals painted along the walls, and filled with all sorts of wondrous treasures. He could see firelight dancing off of small statues of dragons and to his left was a huge saddle propped upon a wooden frame. The chamber was filled with the dim fragrance of incense.

"Donar's hammer..." Einar whispered, looking around. He realized the paintings on the wall told some sort of story -- a story about dragons, like the one of the *Negh* Subetei had told him about. The entire shrine seemed dedicated to this lore -- and to the dragons -- and Einar lost his breath with wide-eyed wonder.

“Dark outside,” Subetei said. He had crossed the chamber toward its apparent solitary entrance, and jogged back now to the hidden doorway, his feet pattering softly against the stone floor.

“This is the story you told me,” Einar whispered, pointing to the murals. “All of this. Is it not? The story you told me about the Negh.”

“Yes,” Subetei replied. He turned Einar about by the shoulders and ushered him back into the stairwell. “We go now. It is dark.”

“Is that a dragonrider’s saddle?” Einar asked. “And those statues -- why the different colors? Were the dragons -- ”

“Walk now, talk later,” Subetei said with a gentle push. “Go.”

Subetei led the group of Seggr and Minghan up the staircase toward the door. “We move quickly, quietly,” he instructed them. “Bedugun -- you move in rear to cover us.”

They followed Subetei along the stairwell and out into the shrine beyond. The Enghan boys stared about them at the enormous paintings and artifacts, their fear forgotten momentarily as they gazed in awestruck wonder. Pryce walked among them, his arm draped protectively about Wen, while Faustus followed, carrying Coinin against his hip. Both Pryce and Faustus paused as they caught sight of the murals.

“Hoah...” Pryce gasped, his eyes growing round.

“Birds,” Coinin whispered, pointing to one of the statues. “Faustus, more birds.”

“Yes, lass,” Faustus breathed, craning his head back and marveling. “The Kahl would like their birds, it seems.”

Subetei bid them to halt at the foyer of the shrine. He and a group of Minghan ducked outside ahead of them, surveying the palace grounds. Subetei’s brows were drawn, his expression puzzled as they returned. “Quiet out there.”

“That is a good thing,” Hagal said, glancing at Einar. “Is it not?”

“Too quiet,” Subetei said. “Something strange.”

“A trick?” Einar asked.

Subetei shook his head, visibly troubled. “Do not know,” he said. “No sentries, nothing. Strange sounds in the sky. Like horns.”

“Horns?” Pryce said.

“It is strange,” Subetei said, seeming to speak more to himself than to anyone else. “Keep close together,” he told the group. “Keep tight. You follow me. We go across grounds, through the snow. We go past carcer along palace walls to gates.”

They filed out of the shrine, holding their ranks closely together. The snow was deep outside on the lawn, piled in great, towering drifts where pathways had been carved through it. Subetei led them along one of the paths, his bare feet moving lightly, swiftly along the frozen ground. The others hurried to match his pace, their breath frosting about their heads, streaming behind them as they passed. They all moved with wide-eyed, frightened urgency, their gazes darting about anxiously, their shoulders hunched with uneasy tension. They had abandoned their candles at the shrine and moved in the darkness, Subetei leading them with unwavering familiarity as he crossed grounds he knew as he might have his boyhood home even without light to guide him.

As they crept through the snow, Pryce kept one arm around Wen, and held his sword in the other. All at once, he paused. “Pryce?” Wen whispered. “What is it?”

“The light,” he whispered, words that made no sense to her. Begudu, the Minghan, came behind them, catching Pryce by the crook of his elbow, urging him forward.

“Go,” he said. “We cannot stop.”

Pryce turned to Wen, looking confused. “Wen, I...I can hear him.”

“Hear who?” Wen asked, bewildered, glancing at Begudu.

“Inside of my mind,” Pryce murmured, and he brought his sword hand to his face, pressing the back of his wrist against his brow. “I hear his voice. He...he is looking through my eyes somehow...”

“Who?” Wen asked again, suddenly frightened that he was suffering some sort of shock-induced breakdown, some delusional side effect of the pain his injuries had brought upon him.

“Rhyden Fabhcun,” he said, and she drew back, her eyes widening in startled surprise. “I...I can hear him...”

From ahead of them came a sudden flurry of sharp, startled, overlapping cries, and they all whirled toward the sounds, recoiling in fright.

“Tengerii boshig!” Subetei cried.

“Hoah -- shit!” someone yelled out in Torachan.

“There are more of them!” someone else cried. “Bloody more of them -- run!”

They had nearly plowed headlong into a group of a dozen bellatori. Both groups collectively scuttled back from the others, both stricken and visibly terrified, both jerking weapons before them, shoving blades toward the other.

“Get back from us!” one of the soldiers shouted at Subetei. “We just want to leave! Please! We just want to get out of here!”

Subetei blinked at the guard, bewildered. He glanced at Einar, who stood behind him.

“Please,” begged another soldier, his sword shaking between his hands. “Please do not call them on us! Please -- we will go! We...we just want to go south -- home again!”

Subetei frowned, suspecting a trick. He spun his sword against his palm and leveled the blade at the soldiers. “What is this?” he demanded. “You stand aside and let us pass. You talk trickery to us.”

“Please,” one of the soldiers said, and then the peculiar, haunting sound of a horn lowing resounded through the deep snow drifts. Subetei had described the sound to them, but they had not heard it since leaving the shrine. Both groups cowered at the sound, looking about in fear and trepidation.

“What in the duchan was that?” Wen whispered, her eyes enormous as she shied near Pryce.

“They are here!” one of the soldiers whimpered. “Hoah, shit and Sweet Mother! They are here!”

The bellatori whirled about, their boot soles skittering clumsily in the snow. Their collective reason seemed to have abandoned them, and they bolted, screaming and scrambling, running away from Subetei and the others.

Subetei turned to Einar, baffled. “What was that?”

Einar shook his head. “I have no idea.”

They heard the soldiers shriek loudly, shrilly from ahead, and all at once, all twelve bellatori came sailing through the air back toward them.

“Tengerii boshig!” Subetei cried. He whirled, grabbing Einar and jerking the boy against his chest as he huddled against the shelter of the drift wall. The soldiers screamed, thrashing wildly as they flew overhead, as if they had been seized and tossed by enormous, unseen hands. They heard the distinctive, wet slapping sounds of the soldiers hitting the snow; the grunts and moans as the breath and wits were knocked from them at the impact.

“What was that?” Hagal whimpered, cowering near Einar and Subetei. His face was ashen, his eyes huge with bewildered fright.

An enormous shadow, more than twenty feet high suddenly swooped down from the black backdrop of the night sky, landing in nearly absolute silence atop the snow drifts. The only way they could be certain of its arrival was the sudden, sharp burst of wind that smacked against them, caused by the flapping of its immense wings -- nearly forty feet in breadth. They could see its eyes in the shadows -- glittering, golden orbs -- and Wen screamed in terror, recoiling, nearly slipping in the snow.

“Run!” Hagal shrieked, grasping Einar by the sleeve and dragging him in tow as he whirled, scampering wildly.

The shadowy, bird-like figure lowered its black head toward them, and there was another horn blast, this one thunderous, shaking the ground beneath them, causing the sloping walls of the path to tremble and crumble, spilling snow down at them.

“Run!” Hagal screamed again. “Run! Run!”

More of the shadowy forms darted from the sky, swooping down, landing all around them. The Seggr panicked, running into one another, stumbling and falling as they cried out in helpless terror, floundering and bolting for any semblance of desperate escape.

Einar moved to rush after them, then realized Subetei was no longer behind him. “Subetei!” he cried in dismay. “Subetei, where are you?”

The Minghan had not moved; they stared all around them at the yellow-eyed, shadowy creatures, their gazes filled more with wonder than fear.

“Subetei!” Einar cried, grabbing the big man by the arm and jerking frantically. “Subetei, what are you -- ?”

“Einar!” a voice shouted out from above. “Einar -- Hvar ert thik?” *Where are you?*

Einar staggered back, dropping Subetei's hand. "Fathir?" he whispered. He turned to look over his shoulder at Hagal, stunned and trembling. "That...Hagal, that sounds like..."

"Einar!" Eirik cried again, and then he appeared above them, standing at the edge of the snow bank, holding a torch aloft in his fist. "Einar!"

"Fathir!" Einar cried, shocked, stumbling, bewildered. He watched as his father scrambled down the slope of snow, his boots kicking deep troughs into the wall. He landed clumsily, stumbling for purchase, and then he rushed toward Einar, his arms thrown wide.

"Einar!" he cried, snatching him off of his feet in a fierce embrace. He spun Einar around, clapping his hand against the cap of his skull, weeping as he kissed his hair, his cheek. "My boy!" he wept. "My boy!"

Impossible as it seemed, Aedhir was there, too; all at once, Aedhir was rushing down the snow bank from above, casting aside his own torch, his boot heels scrabbling for uncertain, frantic purchase in the snow. "Wen!" he cried out. "Pryce! Wen!"

Wen ran to him, weeping. "Father!" she wailed, as she threw her arms around his neck. Aedhir staggered at her sudden, eager weight, and he wrapped his arms about her, squeezing her tightly.

"You are alive," he whispered, kissing her hair, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Hoah, Sweet Mother, Wen...you are alive...!" He looked over her shoulder, still embracing her, and his eyes flew wide with shock and anguish when he saw the starved, stumbling, bearded form of his son. "Pryce...?"

Pryce staggered as Aedhir walked toward him. He fell against the snow bank wall, his eyes enormous and stunned, his voice and strength abandoning him in his shock. He slid his hip against the snow, his legs failing him, and he sat down hard against the ground. "You..." he whispered at Aedhir. "You cannot be here. You...you cannot be..."

"I am here, lad," Aedhir said softly. He genuflected before Pryce, and reached for him.

Pryce closed his eyes. When Aedhir touched him, he flinched, drawing his shoulder toward his cheek. He began to tremble, tears spilling. "I have gone mad. That

is what this has been all along...seeing Wen...being freed...Lord Fabhcun's voice in my head and now this...? Now you...? It has all been a dream. I am still down in my cell...still chained...still in the dark...I...hoah..." He tangled his hands in his hair, shuddering. "I have gone mad!"

"Pryce, no," Wen said, kneeling beside her father and touching his hand.

"Pryce, lad, it is me," Aedhir said, hooking his hand against the back of Pryce's neck, drawing him near. "It is me, I promise you." He folded himself over Pryce, holding him in his arms. "I swear to you, lad, I am here. I am here."

After a long moment, Pryce's body tensed and uncertain against him, Aedhir felt the young man shudder with desperate release, his breath and voice escaping him in a helpless, childlike mewl. "Father...!" he cried, his voice muffled as he clutched at Aedhir's coat. "F-Father...!"

"Hoah, lad, I am here," Aedhir whispered, weeping with him, clutching him tightly. "I am here, Pryce. I love you. I love you, lad."

Subetei looked up as more silhouetted figures lined the snow banks above them, dozens of people. He saw a woman standing above him, her long hair fluttering in the breeze. A man stood beside her, a tall, lean man holding up a torch that reflected golden light in his short, pale hair. A boy stood with them, looking down, meeting Subetei's gaze.

"Dragons," Begudu whispered. "Tengri be praised, it is as the prophecy promised us. The Negh has returned! Kagan Targutai has reclaimed the dragons!"

"The Negh has returned," Subetei said, looking up at the boy and woman behind him. "But it is not Targutai. It never has been."

Begudu turned to him, bewildered. Subetei lowered himself to his knees in the snow. "Minu ejen ba Kagan Temuchin Arightei!" he cried out. *My lord and Kagan!* "Bi iciku ugei medeku ci emune eduge!" *I am ashamed to not know you before now!* "Ci toruku ene erke! Bi magtaqu ci!" *You were born the rightful one! I praise you!*

The Minghan stared between Subetei and the boy, Temuchin Arightei, their faces twisted with shock. "On your knees!" Subetei shouted without raising his eyes. "On your knees -- all of you -- before our Kagan and our Negh, the rightful son we have

shown dishonor for so long! Have shame and be humble. This boy brings us great buyan!”

One by one, the Minghan lowered themselves to their knees, kneeling in prostrated deference before Temuchin. Subetei heard the soft sounds of guta sliding in snow, dropping lightly before him. He heard the rustling of hide, and felt a fingertip tap him lightly against the shoulder. He looked up into the boy’s face; the boy looked at him, his dark eyes kind, his mouth turned in a smile. “Sain bainuu,” Temuchin said.

The woman -- Aigiarn Chinuajin, his mother -- slid down the slope behind him. Her face was battered and bruised, her hair disheveled; she grimaced as she made her way down, as if the movement hurt her. She stood beside her son and stared down at Subetei, her face reflecting none of the softness or kindness Temuchin extended.

“Sain bainuu, minu Kagan,” Subetei whispered to the boy, hanging his head again in shame. “Bi ayu cinu teneg boghul.” *I am your ignorant slave.*

Temu blinked at Aigiarn, disconcerted. He turned back to Subetei. “No,” he said. “You are not.”

“Wen!” Odhran cried. Her eyes flew wide, her mouth spreading in a joyous grin, and then he plowed against her, yanking her off of her feet as he hugged her.

“Odhran!” Wen exclaimed, throwing her arms around his neck and nearly throttling him. She laughed, kissing his cheek. “Hoah -- I never thought I would see you again!”

“You are not rid of me so easily!” he told her, grinning as he set her daintily on her feet again. He realized the bruises on her face for the first time, and his brows lifted in anguish as he reached out, brushing the cuff of his fingers against her cheek.

“It is nothing,” she told him, trying to smile as she batted his hand playfully away. “I will survive, Odhran.”

She turned and found the steward behind her, still holding Coinin hoisted against his hip. Faustus seemed uncertain, despite their apparent rescue, and kept near to Wen, as if expecting at any moment for someone to turn on him. “Faustus, this is my dearest and oldest friend, Odhran Frankley. Odhran, this is Faustus -- he is one of my dearest heroes.”

Faustus blushed at this, blinking shyly, looking down at his shoes. "Hoah, well, my lady," he mumbled. "...I would not go so far as to..."

"How do you do, Faustus?" Odhran asked, smiling and offering his hand.

Faustus accepted the proffered shake, blinking timidly at Odhran, visibly disconcerted by the young man's strapping build, and his decidedly Enghan-like appearance. "...I do quite well, my lord, thank you kindly," he stammered. "It is delightful to make your acquaintance."

Tacita walked over to join them. She had been with Aedhir and Pryce, watching from a fond, but respectful distance as Aedhir had helped Pryce rise to his feet, letting him lean heavily against his father. She came now to greet Wen, smiling brightly, her blue eyes swimming with tears. "Wen..." she said, holding out her hands warmly.

"You remember Tacita?" Odhran asked.

"Of course I do," Wen said, laughing. "I did not fall off the Bith, Odhran. It has only been weeks, surely." She accepted Tacita's embrace. She felt Tacita stiffen suddenly, unexpectedly against her, and she loosened her arms from the woman's shoulders, puzzled and somewhat wounded by this cold turn in her reception. "Tacita...?" she began.

Tacita was looking past her at Faustus. Coinin had turned at the sound of Tacita's voice; now, as she saw the woman's face, her eyes flew wide, and her mouth opened in a happy grin. "Mamma!" she cried, squirming against Faustus, shoving her outstretched arms toward Tacita. "Mamma! Mamma!"

"Mamma...?" Wen whispered, startled. She blinked at Tacita and realized. *How could I have not known it before?* she thought. The resemblance -- the delicate, lovely facial structure, the striking blue eyes -- was so apparent, she felt foolish. Now she understood why Coinin would spend so much time and effort in her nightly prayers and why they had seemed so important to her. *She is the daughter of a missionary*, she thought. *Of course she would have been taught to say her prayers.*

"Aurelia!" Tacita whimpered, all of the color draining from her face. She stumbled, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Aurelia!"

Faustus let Tacita take the girl from his arms. Coinin fell against Tacita, throwing her arms around Tacita's neck, locking her legs around Tacita's slender waist. "Aurelia!"

Tacita cried, kissing Coinin over hand over. She looked up at Faustus, and then Wen, absolutely confounded. “How...? How did you find her? How...how did you...?”

She looked at Coinin’s face and her voice faltered. She saw the catasta tattoo on her child’s cheek and brow, and new tears spilled. “Oh, Mother Above...” she whispered. “Oh, Aurelia...!”

“We match, Mamma,” Coinin said, smiling, running her fingertips along Tacita’s own tattoo. “Both of us. Look, Mamma.”

“Yes, love,” Tacita whispered, drawing her against her shoulder, hugging her fiercely. “I...I see.”

“Wen made me a doll, Mamma,” Coinin chattered into Tacita’s hair. “And Faustus brought me cookies. He read me a story about bunnies and roosters, Mamma, and one with...”

She chattered on and on, a seeming dam within her bursting loose at the sight of her mother, at Tacita’s embrace. She talked and talked, her voice eager and excited, and Tacita turned to Wen, blinking against her tears. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Chapter Nineteen

Aedhir walked down the corridor toward Wen's chamber at the palace, hoping he might have the chance to have breakfast with his daughter. Two weeks had passed since the empire had been driven from both the city of Kharhorin and the Ulusian border with Engjold and he was worried about Wen. She had been very tight-lipped and nonchalantly evasive about what had happened to her during the time she had been in the custody of the empire in Kharhorin.

"She does not know me," he had told Tacita the night before, pacing about their room. "Is that it? She does not know me? Why should she confide in me? I am still so much a stranger to her."

"That is not true, Aedhir," Tacita had said, sitting on their bed, her slender form wrapped in a silk dressing gown. "You are her father. She loves you."

"Then why will she not tell me?" he asked, turning to her, frustrated and anguished. "Something happened to her, Tacita -- more than the bruises on her face. I can see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice...the way she tiptoes around my questions, or shrugs them off as nothing."

Tacita had stood, walking toward him. She had reached up, touching his face. "Because you are her father," she had said again quietly. "And because she loves you. Children try, Aedhir, just like parents do. They want to stay golden -- just like we want to in their regard. Sometimes things happen, and children cannot tell. They find comfort in thinking that if they keep their secrets, their parents will still think they are golden."

Aedhir reached Wen's door. He knocked softly, but even after a few moments, there was no sound, no reply. He lay his hand against the knob and found it unlocked. He opened the door a slim margin and poked his head inside the parlor.

"I think someone hurt her," he had whispered to Tacita, his eyes flooding with tears. He had furrowed his brows and turned away from her. His hands had closed into helpless, pained, trembling fists. "I think someone touched her. I...I think they..."

“Wen?” he called softly into the parlor. The shades were all still drawn against the new morning; the chamber was draped in still, quiet shadows. He stepped into the room, closing the door quietly behind him. “Wen, it is Father.”

“I think they raped her,” he had gasped to Tacita, and then he had burst into tears, clapping his hand over his face, his shoulders shuddering. She had gone to him, wrapping her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his back.

He crossed the parlor toward the doorway of her bedchamber. “Wen?” he called again softly. He looked into her bedroom and froze at the threshold, his eyes widening in sudden, startled surprise.

Wen was still asleep. That was not so unusual; she had taken to keeping very late hours, as if going to sleep frightened her, and she did her best to fight the inclination. She would sometimes sleep until early afternoon, not emerging from her chamber until the sun had fully risen in the sky. She lay on her side, curled beneath her covers, her bare shoulder revealed, her arm draped before her against the blankets. Her hair rested in a halo of tousled curls against her pillow, and her expression was peaceful, the corner of her mouth lifted in a soft, nearly fragile smile.

Pryce slept behind her, his arm folded atop her waist, his hand draped lightly against hers. He nestled closely to her, his chin tucked against her shoulder. The blankets were drawn about his hips, the outline of his long legs beneath resting in complement behind Wen’s. He wore no shirt or underleine and the lean muscles of his chest and stomach were outlined in pale light and heavy shadows.

I am an idiot, Aedhir thought. He had realized long ago the friendship between his son and daughter; a friendship that had faltered when Wen’s identity had been revealed, but one that had been recovering, rebuilding slowly and fostering in the days before they had been abducted from the Enghan. At what point that friendship had apparently shifted into more tender affections, he did not know. He had been looking right at them, just as he had been looking right at Wen all along aboard the *a’Maorga* in the guise of Wenham Poel, and just as he had been oblivious to Wen’s identity, he had been blind to this.

He stared between Pryce and Wen, stricken. *Why did Pryce not tell me? Maybe Wen does not know me well enough to confide everything to me...maybe she wants to*

keep 'golden' in my regard, as Tacita put it, but Pryce...? Why would he keep this from me?

Wen opened her eyes, stirring beneath her blankets, stretching her legs out. She blinked dazedly and caught sight of Aedhir. Her eyes flew wide, and she sat abruptly upright in bed, holding the covers up to cover her bosom. "Father -- !" she gasped.

Aedhir dropped his gaze to his boots and held up his hand. "Do...do not get up," he said. He backed away, turning, walking briskly toward the parlor door. "Excuse me, Aelwen. I...I did not...I did not realize..."

"Father, wait!" Wen called out softly from behind him.

He heard the soft patter of her footsteps, the rustling of fabric as she hurried behind him, drawing a dressing gown over her shoulders. "Father, please," she said, and he paused, his hand poised on the chamber door handle. He did not move; he did not breathe. He stood there, staring at the wood grain of the door.

"Father, I am sorry," Wen said. "Please do not be angry with Pryce."

"I...I am not." Aedhir turned, glancing over his shoulder toward her, watching as she patted her hands against her disheveled hair, trying to tuck it behind her ears. Her eyes were large and round with humiliation and fear.

"Please," Wen said. "Father, I love him." He blinked at her, and she lowered her gaze, the sudden boldness in her eyes and voice wavering. "I love him," she said again. "And he loves me, too. I am sorry we kept it from you. Please do not be angry."

"I am not angry, Wen," he said. "I am surprised, that is all. I feel foolish that I did not see it before now. It must have been in my face all along, but I..."

His voice faded, and he met her eyes. "I never seem to see what is right before me, in plain sight," he said softly, his brows lifting in sorrow as he stroked his thumb against her cheek. "Your mother told me that once. I only see things as I want to, and not as they really are."

"That is not true," Wen said. "What Mother did was wrong. She should not have left you...not like that. She should not have kept you from me like she did. She is cruel to have done that -- to both of us."

Aedhir sighed, brushing a wayward curl back from Wen's brow. "Wen," he said softly. "Ione only did what she did because she thought it was best for you. And maybe she was right."

"No," Wen said, shaking her head.

Aedhir took her face gently between his hands. "Yes," he said. "She loves you very much. Maybe what she did was wrong, but what I did to her was no more right. People make mistakes, Wen. Parents make mistakes. We do not mean them at the time, but they happen nonetheless. I have made mistakes in my life, Wen...so many mistakes, I cannot begin to recount them all. We would be here for years."

He was trying to make her smile, but it did not work. "I left your mother alone," he said. "I left her lonely. I bought her a house and I told her I loved you both, and then I went away. I knew what she wanted, the sort of life she had dreamed of -- the things she wanted for herself, and for you, but I put it in my mind that what I wanted mattered more. I do not blame her for leaving me, for taking you away. Maybe I did once, but I was wrong for it. I had no right to expect her to keep with me or to think that the life I offered you was something worth living. Ione found something better for you both -- someone better. I see the woman you have become for it, and I am blessed."

Wen blinked at him, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Vaughn Ultan loves you," Aedhir said. "And he has been good to you. I am grateful that he would find such love for you and your mother in his heart. And Ione...hoah, she only ever meant to spare you pain, Wen. It would have confused you, hurt you to read my letters. My words would have told you that I loved you and wanted to be with you, but my absence...my life...I would not have been there. Two weeks a year to see you? A note at your birthday, some marks to buy a gift? What kind of father is that?"

"You are a good father," she whispered, more tears spilling. "Do not say that. You are a good father."

"I tried to be," he said. "I tried, Wen. I tried for Pryce, because I knew. I always knew, Even when I was angry with your mother and Vaughn. I could not be a father to you, not in a way that ever would have mattered or made things better. I have been selfish my whole life but I never realized it, Wen. I never understood. Even when Ione

left me, I could not see that it was me. I was to blame. It had been in front of me all along -- her unhappiness, her loneliness, but I refused to see it. I needed to see. For twenty years, I have needed to open my eyes."

He leaned toward her, kissing her brow. "I see now," he whispered. "I am sorry I have let you down."

"You have not," Wen said, shaking her head. "Father, please, you -- "

"I cannot promise that I will not let you down again," he said, looking her in the eye. "But I swear to you, Aelwen -- by my breath, and all that I have -- I will do my best not to. I will do my best to be a good father to you, the sort I should have been all along. I love you so much. I have always loved you, and I always will."

"I love you, too," Wen said. She rose onto her toes, drawing her arms about his neck, hugging him tightly.

Aedhir closed his eyes, struggling against the sting of tears in his eyes. "Pryce is a good man," he whispered to her.

She nodded. "He gets that from his father," she said, and Aedhir laughed. She stepped away from him, hooking her fingers against his, holding his hand.

"He is not one much for pining over girls for no good reason," Aedhir said. He looked beyond her shoulder toward the bedchamber, where Pryce still lay sleeping, his hand still draped against the empty space on the mattress where Wen had rested. "He has never been a flirt, and he would always as soon kept aboard the ship with his books than come ashore for brothels and taverns." He looked at Wen gently. "What I am saying, I suppose, is that if he says he loves you, he means it. He is selfish with his heart, but when he gives it, it is with his all. He gets that from his father, too."

Wen smiled at him, and in that moment, he saw her as she wanted and needed him to see her. She was radiant, golden. "I love you, Daidi," she said.

"I love you, too, Aelwen," Aedhir whispered.

"Rhyden," Aigiarn said. She crossed the breadth of a large formal parlor toward him; he stood with his back to her, gazing out a large window. They were on a break from their negotiations, the seemingly endless shouting session between the Enghan Motinn and the assembled council of Khahl and Oirat that had left both of them

frustrated and exhausted. Rhyden had retreated for solitude and she had spent a good fifteen minutes snooping around the lower level of the palace before finding him.

“Rhyden, are you alright?”

He did not answer her, or even acknowledge her presence. He was not being rude; he could not hear her, and he had obviously lowered his sight, closing his mind.

His ears had not healed from the damage the semamitan’s shrieks had tendered. Actually, Rhyden thought they had healed -- and that, he had tried to explain to Aigiarn, was precisely the problem.

“I think my accelerated healing caused scar tissue to form,” he had told her. “Elves can scar. It is not unheard of. And the mechanisms in our ears are very delicate, sensitive. Too much scar tissue forming too quickly can probably keep those mechanisms from working properly again.”

She had looked up at him, heartbroken. They had been lying in bed together, and he had been leaning over her, his breath soft against her face as he had spoken, his weight gentle against her as he had tried to not jostle her healing ribs. “It might pass,” he had offered with a smile. “Scars tend to fade in Elves when they occur -- our healing, again.”

“But it might not,” she had whispered, touching his face, brushing her fingertips against the delicate point of his right ear.

“I still have my sight,” he said. “I can still hear...of a sort...through that. Mostly what people are saying...sometimes what they only wish they could say out loud.” He laughed. “It could be useful.”

Keeping his sight open to so many for so long tired him, particularly since the negotiation sessions had begun. He would crumple in their bed each night, exhausted and spent, his head aching him. He tried to close his mind whenever he could, but during those times, he was completely deaf, oblivious to the sounds in the world around him.

She did not speak again. She reached out, touching his shoulder, and he jumped, startled as he turned to her. He laughed quietly, blushing slightly to be caught off guard. “Hoah, I am sorry,” he said. She felt it when his mind opened to her; it felt like she suddenly stepped into a broad swath of warm, golden sunlight.

Rhyden touched her face, leaning toward her, kissing her. "Sain bainuu," he said, his lips brushing against hers.

"Sain bainuu," she said. *You disappeared*, she thought. *I was worried about you. I am sorry*, he said. *It was getting hectic. I needed a moment just to breathe.*

Aigiarn looked at him for a long moment. *What were they thinking?* she asked.

He smiled. *Just about as they were saying*, he replied. *A bit less...tactful in their minds than with their mouths.*

The Enghan and Ulusians were arguing rather fervently over several key issues. The most important, at least in Aigiarn's regard, was the southernmost border of the Ulusian Nuqut, and the fact that imperial soldiers still loitered in the region, and that reports of reinforcements coming in from Ebesun and Ordos seemed to suggest the empire meant to keep hold of the land. The Ulusians wanted help in expelling them once and for all, while the Enghan were concerned with threats from their northern territories of impending civil war to protest Einar's appointment as Konung. The Herr was anxious to leave -- just when the Ulusians could have most used their alliance and aid.

She looked beyond Rhyden's shoulder and out the window. She realized what had so attracted his attention: Temu and Einar were outside in the snow, playing together. Both boys had found themselves all at once in similar and unenviable positions among their respective people and had become friends because of this. Aigiarn smiled softly as she watched Einar rush at her son, catching him in the belly with his shoulder, hoisting Temu over his shoulder while Temu laughed and drummed his feet, his mouth spread in a delighted grin.

"Why can we not get along like that?" she murmured, stepping toward the window, pressing her fingertips against the glass as the heat of her breath caused a frosted haze to form.

That is what I was wondering, Rhyden said.

She glanced at him. His expression had suddenly grown forlorn, his eyes filled with sorrow, and she turned to him, worried.

"I cannot hear them laughing," he said softly. "Not like I used to, but I can feel it inside of my mind. It is like water running downhill across rocks and cragged edges -- sparkling and rushing. It is different now."

Do I sound different, too? she asked, because she knew his mental voice -- the one he used when he spoke inside of her mind -- was different than his spoken voice. It was not something she heard anymore than she heard her own thoughts in a particular voice. It simply was; words formed and comprehended within her mind, the golden glow of his presence signifying that he was there.

Rhyden nodded without saying or thinking anything aloud. How peculiar the world must seem to him, she realized. He could no longer hear laughter, bird cries, the crackling of a fire. He could not hear boot heels against the polished stone floors; boots did not have a mind he could open himself to, and though he could hear through the ears of others, it required concentration to do this, and he had told her the sounds were different even then...muted somehow. He could no longer hear; he could only sense things in the quiet whisper of anonymous thought. He had no ability to sense tender inflections or coy nuances in tones of voice. There was no hiding from Rhyden behind courtesy or discretion in conversation, because he could sense every feeling and intention behind every proffered word. The negotiations yammered in his brain in a din of overlapping, jumbled thoughts. Without resonance or distance to lend depth and preference to particular voices, he was left to his own devices to sort through the influx of information, and to try and make sense out of the cacophony with which he must have been assaulted.

"I miss you," he said, looking out the window. "I miss your voice."

I am right here, she told him, taking him by the hand. *My voice does not matter. You have my heart.*

He turned to her and smiled. *And you have mine.*

What are they thinking? she asked him, nodding toward Einar and Temu beyond the glass panes of the window.

"They think we are all old and daft," Rhyden told her, and she laughed. "They think they are going to do things their way, no matter what we decide in our negotiations."

And what is their way? Aigiarn asked, amused -- and not the least bit surprised Temu would think such a thing.

"Friendship," Rhyden said, smiling gently as he looked out the window. "They are going to be friends, and they are going to treat each other as friends." He glanced at her. "It is a good thought," he said. "Einar has some good ideas. I can see them in his mind. I do not quite understand why he is so afraid to be Konung. He has the mind for it and the heart to hear Subetei speak of him."

His voice was changing, a little more each day, because he could no longer hear the sound of it as it issued from his mouth. The lilting cadence she had grown familiar with, the gentle rhythm of his words that was the hallmark of his Tiralainnian dialect was fading. His words grew clipped and flat as he grew less and less aware of annunciation.

He looked at her, perfectly aware of this observation, and she blinked down at her toes, suddenly abashed. "Stop that," she said.

I cannot help it.

"At least pretend you can, then," she said, glancing up at him and smiling, trying to make light of it, hoping to ease the sudden disconcertion in his face. He sensed this intention, too, but he went along with it, smiling back at her.

"Have you heard from Trejaeran?" she asked.

His smile faltered, and his gaze traveled back out the window again. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I do not think I will again."

Why not? she asked. *I thought Temu said he could break free of the qarang'qui, that with his gerel restored after the anam'cladh pierced Targutai's heart, he could --*

"He could," Rhyden said aloud, interrupting her. "He can, and he did." He looked at her and smiled sadly. "I sense him sometimes...his gerel, his presence. He tries to keep hidden. I call to him, but he does not answer."

"Why not?"

Rhyden shrugged, looking out the window. "Because he does not think I need him now. Because he came to me to help me find out some truths...about him, about myself. He came to help me find my way here, to you and Temu." He smiled again. "And that is over now."

"But he is your friend," she said.

“He is my best friend,” Rhyden whispered, brushing his fingertips against the glass. “And I love him.”

Aigiarn realized. *He is here.*

Rhyden nodded. She saw the morning sunlight wink against tears in his eyes. *He is always with me, whether he speaks to me or not...whether I can see him or not.*

“How do you know, then?” she whispered.

He watched Temu below; the boy reached unconsciously for the ongon about his neck. It had become reflexive to him, even with his hiimori gone.

“I know he is with me,” Temu had told Rhyden only days earlier. “I do not need hiimori to know that. I do not need hiimori to believe.”

I do not need my sight to know, Rhyden said to Aigiarn, smiling as a tear slid down his cheek. *I never have. I have only ever needed to believe.*

He turned to her. “He will come around if I am in trouble,” he said, and he lowered his head, wiping his tears with swift, batting motions of his fingertips. “So I suppose this tells me things with the Enghan will turn out alright in the end -- shouting and all.” He laughed quietly.

She touched his face with her hand, rising onto her tiptoes and kissing him. She thought she did a very good job of not wincing as the movement ached her ribs, but he tapped his fingertip against her nose. “That hurt you.”

Aigiarn pretended to frown as she tapped him back on the nose, but she could not help herself and laughed. “Stop that, Rhyden.”

He kissed her again, deeply, sweetly. She felt his mouth unfurl as he smiled, laughing softly when her thoughts filled his mind, welcomed and uncensored. *But do not stop that...not ever.*

Later that night, as the moon reached its midnight posting in the sky, Eirik, Aedhir and Rhyden sat together before a dwindling fire in one of the palace parlors. There was no brimague or portar to be had, but the Ulusians kept a ready supply of quimis on hand, and the Herr had plenty of mead. The three men were well into their cups, and the mood had been light until only recently, when Eirik’s uncle Hamal had interrupted

them, drawing Eirik into brief, but private counsel. Eirik had rejoined them, but he seemed definitely less in good cheer.

“Hoah, bugger me, I am drunk,” Aedhir said, and Rhyden snorted, leaning against him. “I have not been this bloody drunk since I was twelve years old. Did you know I could once spend a bloody night through downing brimague and not feel a whit? And now look at me.”

“You are lovely,” Rhyden assured him, patting his palm against Aedhir’s cheek. “Were I less of a gentleman and more of a lass, I would bring you to bed with me, Captain Fainne.”

Aedhir laughed, shoving Rhyden away from him. “Anyway, lads, this is my last,” he said, holding aloft his cup of mead. “My last for the night, and my last ever.” He belched loudly, twisting his lips to one side to huff out a moist, gurgling breath.

“Here, here,” Rhyden said, lifting his own cup.

“I will drink to that,” Eirik agreed, raising his own.

“I mean it,” Aedhir said. “I have bloody well pissed away years of my life -- years wasted with drink and dim recall. No more. I have recently taken into account those matters in my existence that I find less than appealing, and I mean to correct them. I have re-evaluated my life, as it were.”

“Hoah, me, too,” Rhyden said, nodding.

Eirik raised his brow thoughtfully. “As have I.”

“I want to spend some time with my family,” Aedhir said. “I have a wife now...or, at least I will shortly hereafter, and I mean to make up for lost time with the family I have had all along -- Wen and Pryce.” He looked between his friends. “What about you? What revelations have you come up with?”

“I am bloody deaf,” Rhyden said, and Aedhir snorted with laughter. “That is what I have come up with. No, really. Here...” He stood, opening the bogcu pouch at his sash and withdrawing a sealed envelope. He offered it to Aedhir. “There is my revelation. When you go back to Tiralainn, would you see that delivered to my father?”

“Your father?” Aedhir asked, blinking, taking the envelope in hand. “But I thought you were on rot terms with Eisos.”

“Yes, well,” Rhyden said, and he shrugged, wiggling his fingers in the air. “Revelations.”

“What is it?” Aedhir asked, holding the envelope toward the glowing bank of coals beyond the hearth, pretending to try and read through the sealed parchment.

Rhyden smirked, slapping his hand. “It is a bloody note, that is all,” he said. “A nice little ‘perhaps I have been wrong about you, Eisos.’” He looked down at his feet. “He is my father, after all. Maybe I have wasted enough time of my own, Aedhir.”

“Consulate Homullus sent tidings today,” Eirik said, and Rhyden and Aedhir both blinked at him. Eirik nodded, raising his brow as he turned his cup back and forth between his hands. “There are my revelations. Hamal and Subetei brought me the word about an hour ago. Seems the new government in Torach is willing to rethink its holdings in the Ulus territory and its interests in Engjold.”

“Bloody right they will,” Aedhir said. “Considering you both trounced them.”

“Might be worth consideration,” Eirik said, looking at Rhyden. “And we could both use someone accustomed to dealing with them to speak on our behalf, negotiate with them.”

“Bloody piss on Consulate Homullus,” Aedhir said, shaking his head. “That is what I say.”

Rhyden met Eirik’s gaze. “Will they withdraw from the Nuqut?”

“They might,” Eirik said.

“In exchange for what?” Rhyden asked.

“In exchange for gersimi,” Eirik said.

“Hoah -- no!” Aedhir exclaimed, rising to his feet. “Those rot bastards! Do they never stop? Do not even tell me you are considering it, Eirik! What in the duchan have these past weeks been for if not to keep them from black powder?”

“Aedhir, sit down,” Rhyden said.

“What?” Aedhir blinked at him. “Do you want to see them get it, Rhyden? You know what they will do with it -- they will bloody turn on Tiralainn!”

“They will give Temu the Nuqut,” Eirik said. “And all of the disputed territories the empire now holds. For Temu, the Ordos region, plus the Khar Mountains and Lydia north of Bora Cove, the waterways of the Subean forks. For us, the peninsula of

Breidurnes north of Galjin and from the Bay of Scarvag to the Surensu Sea. They have offered a twenty mile boundary between any imperial territories and ours. They will withdraw all of their troops and fortifications back to beyond twenty miles in Galjin, Lydia and Ebesun.”

“They will not give a damn about Ulus or Engjold once they have black powder, so of course they will bloody withdraw!” Aedhir shouted, closing his hands into fists. “They will come after Tiralainn!”

“Homullus gave assurances he would not,” Eirik said, and Aedhir whirled to him, his eyes flown wide.

“And you believe him?” he cried. “Suddenly, you believe the empire at its word?”

“He says they will use the gersimi to hold the territories they have,” Eirik said calmly. “Nothing more, Aedhir. He specifically promised no advancement or aggression against Tiralainn. He said the empire had only ever needed Ulus to gain access to Engjold and black powder. They rely on their other holdings in the empire for commerce and agriculture -- trade they cannot provide without these lands.”

“Without their slaves in these lands,” Aedhir snapped.

Eirik looked at him wearily. “Aedhir, we cannot free the whole empire,” he said. “We have enjoyed a minor victory here in Kharhorin, but -- ”

“A *minor* victory?” Aedhir said, raising his brows, incredulous. “Thanks to Temuchin Arightei and his dragons, your army defeated legions twice again your numbers, Eirik! You drove more than another legion in full from this city! I would say you have the empire scared witless of you, Eirik!”

“What we have is their respect,” Eirik said. “For the moment, Aedhir -- and only that. Do not think they will not rally against us, come upon us ten thousand fold what we faced in Engjold or here in Kharhorin if they feel antagonized. They are offering us freedom -- unequivocally, Aedhir. All they want in return is our concession so they can keep their other territories from following suit.”

“Does Aigiarn know?” Rhyden asked. He opened his mind and gleaned the answer for himself; Aigiarn had been woken only shortly ago with the news, as had Juchin, Toghrul, Subetei and the other Ulusian leaders. Aigiarn thought it was good news, something to consider, and so did the others. He could sense it in his mind.

"If she does not, she will soon enough," Eirik replied.

"Are you seriously giving thought to this?" Aedhir cried at Rhyden. "Are you that damn drunk, Rhyden? Give me that cup -- it has addled your mind!"

"Aedhir, listen to me," Rhyden said, standing. "I know Priam Homullus. I have known him well for fifteen years. He is a good man, an honorable man of his word. If he has offered it, he will stand by it."

"He is the bloody Consulate of the empire!" Aedhir yelled. He threw his cup across the room; it shattered against the wall, spraying mead and broken pottery. "His word is rot, Rhyden, and you know it!"

"You were willing to trade black powder -- and your weapons -- to them," Rhyden said.

"To barter for my children, yes!" Aedhir replied.

"Temu is my child now," Rhyden said. "I love him as much as any of my own, Aedhir. His family is my family now, his people, my own."

"It is not the same," Aedhir said.

"Where is the difference?" Rhyden asked. "Priam Homullus can be trusted to his word, Aedhir. If he says no harm will come to Tiralainn for it, he means it. He does not share his brother's ambitions. His heart has always been in holding the lands the empire has, in keeping them beneficial to Torach."

Aedhir stared at him, stunned silent with disbelief.

"I believe him," Rhyden said. "And I think it is a fair agreement they would barter."

"I think so, too," Eirik said quietly, hanging his head.

"If I speak as ambassador for Einar and Temu -- and if they agree to it -- I will tell them fifty miles," Rhyden said, turning to Eirik. "Fifty miles of imperial withdrawal from any borders, and a guarantee -- in Consulate Homullus' hand, signed by the whole of the Senate -- that there would be no further attempts against Ulu, Engjold or Tiralainn." He looked at Aedhir. "Or Tiralainn, Aedhir. I have spent fifteen years bartering agreements with most of the men now sitting on the Senate, including Priam Homullus. They know me. They trust me. They will give me their word. And if they are lying to me, I have the sight. I cannot hear their voices, but I can hear their thoughts. I will not barter with them if they are."

Aedhir's expression softened, the anger waning into dismay. "Rhyden, if you do this, Kierken will never forgive you. Neisrod will never forgive you. There will be nothing I can do -- nothing I can say on your behalf -- that would make them change their minds."

"I know," Rhyden said, nodding.

Aedhir blinked at him, stricken. "You would be a traitor. I could live with that when the choice was mine. There was nothing for me in Tiralainn, but as for you...? Rhyden, you are a hero to your people -- Elves and men. You are a legend."

"I know," Rhyden said. He rested his hand against Aedhir's shoulder. "That has never been what I wanted."

"You..." Aedhir said. "But you are my friend."

Rhyden smiled at him. "And you are mine. Trust me, then, as your friend. You have your life back, and your family. It is waiting for you in Tiralainn. Mine is here in Ulu. I have nothing to lose in Tiralainn but a reputation I have never wanted or deserved to begin with. It would be a blessing for me."

"You are lying," Aedhir said.

"I am Gaeilge," Rhyden replied. "I cannot lie."

Aedhir stared at him for a long moment. *Trust me*, Rhyden whispered in his mind. *Please, Aedhir.*

"You are mad," Aedhir said. He hooked his arm around Rhyden's neck and hugged him fiercely. "You are bloody mad, Rhyden Fabhcun."

Rhyden patted his hand against Aedhir's back, closing his eyes. "I love you, too, Aedhir," he said against his friend's ear.

Chapter Twenty

You are troubled, the dragon said to Temu. Its name was Tarva, and its hide was as bright and blue as the Chagan Sea on a windless morning. Tarva had once belonged to Temu's ancestor, Dobun, and he was well over fifteen thousand years old.

Temu looked up as Tarva lowered his enormous head toward the boy, its golden eyes turning to Temu. "Rhyden left today," he said softly, brushing his hands along the pebbled surface of the dragon's snout. "He went south to the Nuqut to meet the empire, to go with them to Cneas. He is going to negotiate with them so they will free our lands - all of them. They have promised never to come back."

This makes you sad? Tarva asked, huffing warm, moist breath against Temu's face.

"He has to give them black powder," Temu said. "That is what they want. It is what they asked for to leave us alone. His people will be angry with him for it." He blinked against sudden tears. "They will say he is a traitor. He can never go home again, Tarva."

Perhaps this is his home now, Tarva said quietly. A low moan of air escaped through his pate crest.

"It is not fair," Temu whispered. "They are giving us our land back -- everything that was ours before, when Borjigidal had his empire. It is just like Ag'iamon promised. Just like the legends said -- I would wake the dragons, and rebuild our empire." He watched his tears drop between the toes of his gugal, sinking into the snow. "Only it was not supposed to be this way," he whispered. "Not like this."

How do you know? Tarva asked.

"I was supposed to do it somehow," Temu whispered. He shook his head. "Not Rhyden. Me."

You agreed to it, Tarva said. *He asked you, and you gave answer. You did what your heart told you was right. It seems to me that you did do it, Temuchin.*

Temu looked up. "Rhyden is sad," he said. "His friends have left again for Tiralainn."

Aedhir and his family had left two days ago for their homeland, all except for Odhran Frankley, who had traveled back to Engjold with Einar and his people more than a week earlier. Odhran was going to marry Einar's sister and remain among the Enghan. Aedhir, meanwhile, had been reluctant to leave because he did not want Rhyden to be disgraced in Tiralainn, and Rhyden had all but needed to shove him aboard a ship to see him go.

"Rhyden will never see them again, and he knows it," Temu said. "I think even without his sight, he knows."

Never is a long time, Tarva said. And no sight gives one a complete glimpse of the future. Hiimori gives us insight...it lets us see paths we might follow, but the choice remains ours. Even you chose to find us. You could have turned back. There were times when your heart was tempted. You chose the path to our lair. There is no destiny carved in stone.

"Targutai would not have done this," Temu said. "Targutai would have fought the empire. He would have used you -- all of the dragons -- to take our lands back by force. He would not have bargained with them."

They had left Targutai behind beneath the Khar Mountains. Tarva had been the first dragon to emerge from the lair. He had been the one who had first spoken to Temu, recognizing him as the Negh. He had been the one who had shown Targutai the truth, reaching into the boy's mind and revealing to him the whole of Mongoljin's deceit, and the bitter legacy it had left behind. Targutai's breath had drawn abruptly still, tangled in his throat in an audible gasp, his eyes flying wide. The strength had waned in his knees, and he had collapsed to the ground, his expression horrified and stricken. "No...!" he had whimpered, shaking his head slowly. "No, no...it...please, it cannot..."

They had shown him the truth, and Temu had realized this, and yet somehow, he had found it within himself to feel pity for Targutai. He had never known; the Khahl had never known. Mongoljin had told Duua and his people lies about the dragons -- lies they had believed for thousands of years. Targutai had truly thought he was the Negh.

Targutai had blinked at him, stunned and aghast. "It...it cannot be true..." he had whispered.

"I am sorry, Targutai," Temu had told softly.

Targutai had stumbled to his feet, his brows furrowing, his mouth turning in a frown. "I do not want your pity," he had snapped at Temu. He had staggered back, hiccupping for breath. "I hate you. I...I hate you, Temuchin Arightei. You have tricked them somehow. You lied. You did not lose your hiimori. You robbed me of mine again, and you have tricked them. You put those thoughts...those images in my mind. I hate you."

He had whirled around and ran away, darting for the chamber door, his voice cracking into sobs. "I hate you!" he had shrieked. "I hate you, Temuchin Arightei! I will see you rot for this!"

There had been no finding him, no telling where in the countless miles of dark passageways he had fled. They had left him there, and Temu's heart was still filled with remorse and unhappiness for it.

"He was stronger than me," Temu said to Tarva. "He knew how to be a leader, the Kagan. What do I know?" He looked up at the dragon helplessly. "He would never have bargained with the empire. He would have fought them. Is that what I should have done, Tarva?"

Sometimes strength does not come from fists or limbs, Tarva said. And a true leader must understand that sometimes fighting does not prove you are strong.

Temu blinked at him, confused.

You can beat a rock with a scimitar for forty years, and have nothing to show for it but a dulled blade with chips in it for the effort, Tarva told him. You can take this same rock and drip water upon it for forty years, and in the end, you will have hollowed a deep groove in the stone. That is true strength, Temuchin -- when you can be the water, not the sword.

"Yeb used to say that," Temu whispered. "That is what he would tell Mamma."

Your shaman was a wise man, Tarva said, and Temu smiled.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Yes, he was."

Things are not as you would like them, Tarva said. Or how you thought they would be. But it is the way they are, Temuchin, and they have come to pass for a reason.

"Do you think so, Tarva?" Temu asked. "Do you believe that?"

It is for your heart to decide, Temuchin, not mine, the dragon replied. Do you believe you have followed the right paths? Do you believe the choices you have made are the ones you felt were right in your heart?

"Yes," Temu said.

He felt Tarva's mind within him, the warm glow of sunshine as the dragon smiled. *Then you have chosen wisely, Temuchin, Tarva said. And you are precisely where you are meant to be.*

THE END

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Sara Reinke lives with her family in Kentucky. An associate regional editor for a leading travel magazine, she is also an award-winning novelist. Her debut fantasy, *Book of Days*, the first in the Chronicles of Tiralainn series from Double Dragon Publishing, was named one of the Top 10 Science-Fiction and Fantasy Novels of 2005 in the annual Preditors & Editors Readers Poll and a Finalist in the 2005 Dream Realm Awards recognizing excellence in electronically published speculative fiction. Subsequent volumes -- *Book of Thieves* and *Book of Dragons, Volumes 1-5* have all been best-selling titles for Double Dragon. Additional titles, including the historical romance *An Unexpected Engagement* (Medallion Press), the science-fiction thriller *Tethers* (Samhain Publishing) and the paranormal romance, *Dark Thirst* (Kensington Books/Zebra) are all currently available in local bookstores or through leading online book retailers. For more information on Reinke and her work, visit her online at www.sarareinke.com.