

BOOK OF DRAGONS

BOOK THREE IN THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN SERIES
VOLUME TWO OF FIVE



SARA REINKE

Book of Dragons: Book Three in the Chronicles of Tiralainn - Volume Two

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Chapter One

Rhyden awoke to the faint, amber glow of new morning sunlight, and a young boy sleeping next to him. There was something heavy covering his body, a pile of thick blankets and furs that tickled against his throat and chin, enfolding him in warmth. The boy lay with his face so near that Rhyden could feel the soft press of his breath against him. The boy's small, gloved hands were draped against Rhyden's, his fingers gently folded between Rhyden's own.

Where am I?

Rhyden blinked dazedly, feeling the clouds and haze of sleep lifting from his mind. He struggled to figure out where he was, what had happened to him, but the events of the last twelve hours seemed completely obliterated from his mind. The last memory he could recall in full was sitting in a longboat with Aedhir, leaving the *a'Maorga*, and rowing across Lunan Bay toward the wharfs and piers of Capua.

Aedhir.

Where is Aedhir?

"Aedhir..." he said, his voice escaping his throat in a hoarse, damaged croak. He tried to raise his head, to move, stretching his long legs beneath the blankets.

"Aedhir...where...where are you?"

The child murmured softly in his sleep at the sound of Rhyden's quiet voice, and Rhyden's breath drew still, his eyes widening in alarm. The boy did not rouse, however; he settled himself comfortably, his eyes closed, his murmurs fading.

Rhyden moved his arms and frowned to discover that his wrists were bound together with thick, knotted ligatures.

What in the duchan...?

Rhyden moved his hands experimentally; the ropes offered little wriggle room, and he could feel the coarse fibers cutting into his flesh. Whatever had happened to him, wherever he was, the presence of those ropes—and the seeming absence of Aedhir—did not bode well, and his frown deepened.

He slipped his hands away from the boy's without stirring him. *I know him*, Rhyden thought, his confusion only mounting. He recognized the child's face, his golden complexion like aged parchment and softly rounded features; the unusual, flattened appearance of his nose and bowed curves of his mouth. *I have seen him before, standing on the deck of the a'Maorga. I saw him in a dream...a vision...*

The boy was no vision now. Rhyden shifted his weight slowly, deliberately beneath the blankets, shrugging his shoulder and forcing his right elbow beneath him somewhat. He used his arm and shoulder as a fulcrum and pushed with his legs, propping himself up. His hand swam and he lowered his face, closing his eyes and groaning softly as a wave of uncertain vertigo waxed and waned.

What has happened to me? Where is Aedhir?

All at once, a peculiar realization occurred to him, and Rhyden opened his eyes, startled and puzzled. Every morning of every day of his entire adult life, he had sat up to feel the heavy, disheveled weight of his hair draping over his shoulders and into his face. If he happened to have laid upon its long sheaf in his sleep, he would feel the gentle strain against the crown of his head as he rolled over, his hips pinning his hair beneath him. He did not feel these things now; he felt cold air against the back of his neck. The blankets had shifted, drooping down to the middle of his back, and he could feel this same bitter air against his shoulders, his chest. He looked down at himself, bewildered, and realized two things simultaneously: he was naked

Hoah, now...!

and his hair was gone. It was not simply draped down his back, out of sight. It was gone; its familiar and comforting weight and warmth completely vanished. It had been cut at the nape of his neck and he could feel the shorn tips brushing against his cheeks as it drooped down from the crown of his forehead across his brow.

"Hoah...!" Rhyden gasped, sitting upright, jerking his legs about in surprise and alarm. His hands darted instinctively for his head, his hair and his knees struck the boy in front of him unintentionally.

The boy's eyes flew wide as he jumped from sleep to awake in one abrupt, startled moment. He sat up, his eyes enormous as he scuttled backwards, scrambling

away from Rhyden. His sudden movement frightened Rhyden anew and he jerked again, recoiling, his legs tangling in the blankets.

“Hoah—!” he gasped again, staring at the boy. He groped against the side of his cheek, brushing through the cropped remnants of his hair. *They cut my hair*, he thought, horrified and angry, although he had no idea who *they* might be. *Those rot bastards...someone cut my bloody damn hair!*

“You are awake,” the boy said, breathless with sleepy disorientation and fright. He inched back all the more, pushing against the ground with the heels of his large, cumbersome boots.

“Who are you?” Rhyden said. His mouth felt thick and dry, as though he had spent the night through with wool fleece crammed between his cheeks. He struggled against his bindings, trying to move his hands. “Where the bloody duchan am I and what have you done with my friend? Where is Aedhir?”

The boy blinked at him. Rhyden realized that the two of them had slept beneath some sort of canopy, a broad swatch of hide stretched over them. The boy had scooted himself beyond the proscenium of the canopy’s overhanging shadows and past the child’s shoulders, Rhyden could see the belly of a longboat lined with benches, a solitary mast rising from the center. He could see people sleeping on the benches, or moving slowly about; his keen ears caught the sounds of a large sail snapping quietly as it found a current of breeze. Beyond the sides of the boat, he saw the open expanse of sea; he could feel the motion of the water as the boat cleaved a steady path across it and his heart seized with bright panic.

The sea? Mother Above, I am on a boat out on the sea!

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head, his eyes widening in horrified realization. “No, no, you...you cannot...” He stared at the boy, stricken. “Where are you taking me? What have you done to my friend?”

“Please,” the boy whimpered, frightened. There were people walking toward him, alerted by the child’s fear, his backpedaling. The boy glanced over his shoulder. “Yeb, please! He is awake!”

A man knelt beside the boy, peering beneath the canopy at Rhyden, and Rhyden recognized him—the memory of his face, his smile, the yellow vest he wore lashed about his robe flooded back to him in sudden, staggering clarity.

You are not from Capua, the man had told him on the waterfront, brushing his fingertips through Rhyden's long hair to reveal the Elfin point of his ear.

"Do not be frightened," the man said to Rhyden, reaching out with his hand. His face was set in a gentle, kindly expression, his voice soft and soothing but Rhyden recoiled from him.

"Do not touch me—ow, bloody damn it!" Rhyden winced as his shoulders, the back of his head slammed painfully against the tapered beams of the stern corner.

The man moved slowly forward, keeping his hand extended, his smile reassuring. "My name is Yeb Oyugundei. Please do not be frightened."

"Keep away from me," Rhyden said, shrinking against the side of the boat. When Yeb made no effort to stop in his advance, Rhyden stood without thinking, stumbling backwards, reacting purely out of reflexive alarm. The cap of his head, his shoulders caught the tarp overhead, ripping it loose of its moorings and sending the hide collapsing down. He yelped, floundering as it enfolded him.

He staggered blindly forward and felt his knees collide solidly with Yeb Oyugundei's shoulder and skull. Yeb uttered a sharp cry as Rhyden tripped over him, and then Rhyden fell gracelessly, dragging the canopy with him, his chin plowing sharply against the floor of the boat. His back teeth clamped mightily against his tongue with the impact, drawing blood. Rhyden flapped his bound arms, shrugging his shoulders and struggling wildly to get the canopy off of him as he stumbled to his feet. He managed to shove the hide tarp away and staggered back clumsily, his eyes wide with fright and alarm. The deck of the longboat was filled with men—more than a dozen of them—all of them armed and approaching, their eyes filled with panic, their hands falling against the hilts of daggers and swords.

"Keep away from me!" Rhyden shouted, nearly tripping and falling again over the folds of canopy beneath his feet. He felt someone suddenly grasp his shoulders firmly from behind, and he reacted swiftly, instinctively. He reached up with his bound hands, seizing the man behind him by the wrists. He swung his elbows to his right, wrenching

the man's shoulder at an abrupt, excruciating angle; Rhyden heard him cry out, his voice sharp and filled with startled pain. Rhyden folded at the waist, his knees buckling as he threw the man over his shoulder, sending him sprawling across the nearest bench, splintering the wood with the impact of his weight.

Rhyden stumbled again, pressing himself into the corner of the stern. The man who had attacked him had been manning a rudimentary sort of rudder here; from Rhyden's fleeting glance, it looked more like an oversized oar than anything else.

"Keep away from me!" he cried again, as the others drew to hesitant, wary halts. Some went to their injured friend's aid; the man lay on the floor, moaning softly, cradling his hurt arm against his belly and writhing.

Rhyden tasted blood in his mouth from where he had bit his tongue and spat, grimacing. He spared a swift, sweeping glance at the horizon and saw that the boat sailed along a distant shoreline to the right, much too far away to reach by swimming, especially bound and naked, and in the likely icy water. On the left, there was nothing but the broad span of the sun-dappled sea. There was no sign of Lunan Bay, or the *a'Maorga*, and he had learned enough from Aedhir, from looking at the Captain's maps and charts to know that if the land was to the right, the ocean to the left, it meant they were sailing north, following the Ionium wind and sea currents away from Capua. He gasped, dismayed and terrified anew.

"Where are you taking me?" he shouted at the men, closing his hands into defiant, furious fists. "Where is my bloody damn ship, you bastards? Where is my friend, Aedhir? What have you done to him?"

One of them stepped forward, a tall, broad-shouldered man about Rhyden's age. His long, black hair had been shaved along the contours of his temples, gathering at the base of his neck in a thick plait. He bore a sword between his fists, a long, curved blade that widened into a broad, angled tip. It was an intimidating weapon, and Rhyden drew back, squaring his shoulders and meeting the man's stern gaze.

"Get down on your knees, Elf," the man said to him.

"No," Rhyden said.

The furrow between the man's brows deepened. "I said get down on your knees. No one here wishes to harm you. Do not make us."

“Toghrul—no!” cried a loud, anguished voice. The boy who had been sleeping beside Rhyden darted out from beneath the canopy that had fallen atop him. He rushed between the man and Rhyden, holding out his hands in desperate implore. “No, no, Toghrul, please! Please do not hurt him!”

“Temuchin, get away from him,” the man, Toghrul said, his expression stricken. The tip of the sword wavered as he held out one hand, reaching for the boy. “He is dangerous.”

“No,” the boy said, shaking his head, his voice choked with tears. He turned and looked at Rhyden over his shoulder, his eyes wide and frightened. “No, Toghrul, please do not hurt him! He does not understand! Please—you are frightening him!”

“Temuchin, step away from the Elf right now,” said a woman, shouldering and shoving her way through the men. She was petite in stature, and beautiful. Like the others, she had golden skin, almond-shaped eyes, a short, flat nose and dark hair. Like the boy and the man, Yeb Oyugundei, she seemed distantly familiar to Rhyden.

The woman placed her gloved hand against the man, Toghrul’s, and he deferred to her, lowering the sword. She looked at the boy. “I said now, Temu. No one is going to hurt him. Come here with me.”

The boy glanced again at Rhyden, stricken, tears spilling down his cheeks. “Please,” he whimpered at Rhyden. “Please, it...it is alright. Please...!”

“Temuchin!” the woman snapped sharply, and the boy scampered over to her, shying behind her, clutching against her heavy, fur-lined robe with his gloved fingertips.

“Who are you?” Rhyden said. The woman turned to Rhyden and he swung his bound hands in a broad arc, indicating the deck of unfamiliar men. “Who are you people? Where is my friend? What have you done to Aedhir?”

The woman’s thin brows narrowed slightly she met Rhyden’s eyes. “I am Aigiarn Chinuajin,” she said. “And these are my people, the Oirat.”

Oirat. The word was familiar to him, as well and he remembered Aedhir mentioning it. He and Aedhir had left the waterfront together after meeting Yeb Oyugundei, and they had gone to a pub in Capua.

How could I have forgotten this? he thought, confused and dismayed.

He was an Oirat, Aedhir had told him, meaning Yeb. A vagabond people...a worthless race. Those are the southern tribes, steppe nomads, barbarians...nothing but beggars and thieves. They refuse to acknowledge the Torachan empire and live like dogs out in the mountains and wilderlands. They are considered enemies to the empire, renegades.

“We do not know this man you speak of, your friend,” Aigiarn Chinujain told him. “We have done nothing to him. We do not know where he is.”

“My name is Rhyden Fabhcun,” Rhyden said. “I am the ambassador to Cneas, in Torach for the realm of Tiralainn. I sailed to Capua aboard a merchant frigate under the command of Captain Aedhir Fainne, of the Tiralainn Crown Navy. I do not know how I have come to be here, but Captain Fainne will be looking for me. He will send word to our King that I am missing—and to Cneas. You must take me back to Capua at once. If you keep me here, it is against my will, and will be construed as an act of war by my King.”

The woman arched her brow at him. “You have just assaulted one of my people. I might construe that as an act of war, as well.”

He blinked at her, startled by her reply. “Turn this boat around.”

“And if I will not?” she asked. “What will you do? Jump into the sea and swim for shore? The water is like ice and you are bound and unclothed. You would be dead in moments. I do not think you would be so foolish. Would you fight us all? Again, you are bound and we are armed. I do not think you would be that foolish, either. You do not have many options, Rhyden Fabhcun.”

She stepped toward him. She wore a sword and knife against her hip, but made no move for either weapon. She presented her hands to him, her empty palms extended, holding his gaze fast. “Get down on your knees.”

He remembered her face. He had dim, disturbing, hazy memories of being someplace loud and cold; the fetid smell of the air, a mingling of sweat, fear, urine and despair had filled his nose, and voices had rang about him in a confusing, cacophonous din. He remembered looking down at her from some sort of elevated platform. He had been bewildered and frightened, and she had gazed kindly at him, her brows lifted as though with pity.

She stepped closer to him. "Get down on your knees," she said again. "You are confused, I know. Give me the chance. I will explain to you."

"Keep away from me," he said, shying back.

"I will not hurt you," she said.

"I do not believe you."

"I give you my oath that I will not," she said.

"I do not believe that, either."

She raised her brow again, standing before him. "Have you any choice?"

He stared at her, dismayed. *No*, he thought. *No, I do not*. He lowered himself slowly to his knees, and she knelt with him, holding his gaze the entire time. Without averting her eyes, Aigiarn reached for her knife, curling her fingers against the elaborately carved bone hilt. She drew the broad blade loose from its sheath, and Rhyden flinched at the wink of sunlight off of the steel. "Do not," he said, and he seized her wrist firmly between his hands.

"Aigiarn...!" Toghrul said from behind her, his voice sharp with alarm. He darted forward, leveling his sword again.

"It is alright, Toghrul," Aigiarn said, glancing over her shoulder and giving the man pause. He stared at her, his sword still poised, his expression stricken and uncertain. "Step back. It is alright."

Toghrul lowered the broad edge of his blade. He stared at Rhyden, an undisguised threat gleaming in his dark eyes, proffered in his furrowed brows: *If you harm her, I will kill you*.

Aigiarn looked at Rhyden once more. "I will not hurt you," she said again, quietly. She tried to draw her hand away from his grasp and after a moment, Rhyden relented, opening his fingers and releasing her. She slipped the edge of the blade against the bindings and began to cut them loose, sawing her dagger through the thick ropes.

"Nakhu, Ashir, help bugu Yeb up," she said, addressing the men behind her without looking away from Rhyden. "Set that canopy back in place. Bektair, find me a del and some leggings that Rhyden Fabhcun might clothe himself. See if we have any gloves and gutal to fit him. Sacha, bring me a waterskin. I am certain he is thirsty."

The last of the ropes snapped free against her blade, dropping to the floor by Rhyden's knees. He moved his hands slowly as she raised her hips, sheathing the knife once more, and he rubbed the chafed, scraped portions of his wrists gingerly. He watched her warily as she stood, walking toward the fallen canopy. She shoved part of it aside, finding a fur blanket beneath its folds. She took it in hand and brought it to him.

"Thank you," he said softly, accepting the blanket, drawing it about his shoulders. Aigiarn nodded. "You are welcome."

Whoever they were, this group of Oirat who had taken him, it soon became apparent to Rhyden that they knew little, if anything about Elves. He sat alone beneath the canopy drawn across the stern of the knarr for the better part of the next hour while they steered the boat toward the shoreline, meaning to bring it into the land. They had offered him a small pouch of water and food, some bread that was as hard and flavorless as a stone, and a ragged scrap of dried, fibrous meat that had been toughened by curing, with an unfamiliar but not entirely unpleasant flavor to it. These had been delivered to him by two of the armed men, who had passed them quickly and wordlessly, their expressions drawn and dark with suspicion. No one else had come near to him since, and he had sat quietly, trying to chew on the meat, listening to them talk about him.

They did not realize he could hear them, which was his first indication that they were as unfamiliar with his race as he was with theirs. Aigiarn and Toghrul stood together in close counsel at the far end of the boat, near the bow, and they spoke in murmured voices, but Rhyden's keen ears caught every word they exchanged, as though they stood right in front of him, talking aloud.

"You should not have untied him," Toghrul said. "I do not trust him."

"And he does not trust us," she replied, resting her hand comfortably against the hilt of her curved sword. "Keeping his hands bound only strengthens his uncertainties, his fears. We must do what we can. He will not help us if he does not trust us, Toghrul."

This seemed to be a major point of concern for the Oirat—whether or not Rhyden would help them. He did not know what help they expected from him; despite Aigiarn's promises to the contrary, no one had made any effort to explain anything to him. They

had also not brought him any clothes, despite her assurances to that, as well, and Rhyden drew the folds of blankets and furs about his shoulders, realizing there was likely good purpose served by keeping him nude. Aigiarn had unfettered his hands, but he remained for all intents and purposes, her prisoner. He suspected that she was letting him sit there, shivering and naked beneath the blankets as a means of keeping him somewhat helpless and under control for the moment.

The little boy, Temuchin and the man in the yellow vest, Yeb sat nearby on a bench together. Yeb had scraped his face when the canopy had collapsed, and Rhyden had stumbled over him. He held a small square of linen up to stave the bleeding from a narrow gash along his brow, and Temuchin sat with him, his expression troubled, his eyes filled with worry.

“Will he help us, Yeb?” Temuchin whispered. He glanced at Rhyden somewhat warily, and Rhyden felt momentarily shamed that he had frightened the boy. He thought that Temuchin was in all likelihood a son to Aigiarn and Toghrul; he had deferred to them as he would have parents. The boy had apparently defied their wishes and had been kind to him for the effort; he had snuggled against him in the night, unafraid. He had stood against Toghrul in Rhyden’s defense, pleading on his behalf, and such an act took a great deal of courage, particularly in one so young.

“I do not know, Temu,” Yeb replied. He looked at Rhyden, his eyes kind and steady, as though he knew that Rhyden could hear them, and was perfectly aware of his eavesdropping. Rhyden lowered his face, feeling uncomfortable beneath the man’s unflinching gaze. “It is his alone to decide, not yours or mine.”

They refuse to acknowledge the Torachan empire and live like dogs out in the mountains and wilderlands, Aedhir had told Rhyden of the Oirat. They are considered enemies to the empire, renegades. Torach has tried for years now to be rid of them, without much luck.

Yeb had overheard Rhyden’s conversation with the harbormaster at Capua. He knew Rhyden was an ambassador to the empire. Rhyden began to wonder if this “help” the Oirat seemed to want from him involved using him as a bargaining tool against the Torachan Pater Patriae and Senate. Maybe they wanted to be free of the empire, their southern steppelands returned to them as an independent state. If they were a people

forced into nomadic lives, “living like dogs,” as Aedhir had phrased it, they would be desperate enough to try such measures when presented with the opportunity—which they had been when Yeb had discovered Rhyden in Capua.

Rhyden groaned softly, pressing his fingertips against his brow. *Here are troubles I do not need*, he thought unhappily. He had no interest in being any sort of political pawn—unwilling or otherwise—in an imperial dispute he knew—and cared—nothing about. His familiarity with Torachan policies extended only as far as those that affected or impacted Tiralainn; in particular, coal, iron and silver mining, steel production, trade importing and exporting and rights of waterway. It seemed to him that the Oirat, in their simple, misguided ambitions had mistaken him for someone of importance to Cneas.

He had been filled with fire when he had snapped that Kierken would see his abduction as an act of war, but in truth, while Kierken would likely be alarmed and troubled by it, he would also be relatively helpless. There was also precious little Aedhir could do; he might be a commander in the Crown Navy, but in Torach, his position granted him no influence. The empire would not likely allow Aedhir or even Kierken to use Crown soldiers to search for him. And if Torach refused to even use their own troops to search for Rhyden—which was probable, given they had no vested interest in Rhyden’s well-being whatsoever—the worst that would come of it would be Kierken calling Aedhir and the *a’Maorga* back to Cuan’darach immediately, Tiralainn disassociating itself from the Morthir and the rekindling of previously long-standing animosities between the two realms.

Hoah, I do not need this, Rhyden thought, and he groaned again. *I just want my bloody life back—my boring, isolated life alone in Cneas. I had just made up my mind to be satisfied with that...to forget about Qynh or returning to Tiralainn. I do not need this.*

“Are you alright?”

Rhyden opened his eyes, lowering his hand. The boy, Temuchin was at the edge of the canopy, peering at him. He crouched low to the floor, his legs tucked beneath him, hiding somewhat in the shadow of the overhanging hide, as though anxious that someone would see him and scold.

Rhyden managed a smile for the boy. What had happened was not his fault; he was just a child, as helpless in his involvement in the entire mess as Rhyden. “I am fine.”

Temuchin smiled at him in return, briefly, shyly. “I could bring you some more food,” he offered.

Rhyden glanced down at the half-gnawed strip of withered meat he had been working his teeth loose of their moorings by eating. “No, I think this will be fine, thank you,” he said. “Your name is Temuchin?”

The boy nodded, smiling again, more broadly. He seemed genuinely pleased that Rhyden had picked up on this. “Yes. Temuchin Arightei.”

The boy’s smile seemed to grace his entire face, filling him with radiant cheer, and Rhyden could not help but soften. He offered his hand. “I am Rhyden Fabhcun. It is nice to meet you, Temuchin.”

Temuchin blinked at Rhyden’s outstretched palm, puzzled. After an uncertain moment, Rhyden realized the boy had no idea that the gesture was intended as affable greeting. Just as he began to lower his hand, Temuchin reached out, catching it between his own. He stepped beneath the canopy, kneeling next to Rhyden, cradling his hand as if it were a delicate blossom against his palms. Rhyden watched him, curious, as the boy bit the fingertips of his glove with his teeth and drew it off. He traced along the lengths of each of Rhyden’s fingers as though fascinated by them.

“Why are your fingers so long?” Temuchin asked softly, looking up at Rhyden.

“All of my people have long fingers like this,” Rhyden said, giving a demonstrative little waggle, making Temuchin smile. “I am a Gaeilge Elf. My ancestors used to live in the trees. We needed long arms and legs, fingers and toes to help us climb.”

“A Gaeilge Elf,” Temuchin repeated, saying *Gaeilge* slowly, paying attention to pronounce it as Rhyden had. “Why are your ears pointed?”

“My mother used to tell me that the Good Mother pinched us there when she would deliver us to the Bith as babies,” Rhyden said with a smile. “But I think it was because we were hunters once. We needed larger ears, flatter against our heads because of the points, to hear animals better across distances.”

“The Good Mother,” Temuchin said. “Is she like Itugen—Mother Earth?”

Rhyden raised his brow. He had never heard the Good Mother referred to as *Itugen* before. “I do not know. She is mother of the earth, yes, and the sky. And everything in between them both, I suppose.”

“Etseg is father of the sky,” Temuchin told him. “The Tenger bring everything in between. They are Itugen and Etseg’s children—Umai, Erleg and Ulger, and the elementals, Golomto, Usan and Keiden. It was Keiden who brought you to us. He commands the wind. Ag’iamon promised he would send you.”

Rhyden gazed at the boy in interest. The Torachan empire had ordered all of the states within its empire to convert from individual pagan religions to that of the Mater Matris—the monotheistic worship of the Mother Creator, or the a’Pobail Creideamh as it was known in Tiralainn. The Oirat had denounced the empire, and he was fascinated that they might have clung stubbornly to their own polytheistic beliefs.

“Who is Ag’iamon?” he asked.

“He is the dragon lord,” Temuchin said. “He is the one who called all of the dragons away from us. He said they would keep hidden until you came. Keiden, the wind spirit would bring you to lead us to them.”

Startled, Rhyden said, “Lead you to them?”

“Yes,” Temuchin said, nodding. “He said he would send a golden falcon from the west to show us the way. You live in the west, Yeb said—in Tiralainn. You have golden hair, and your name means *falcon*. I heard you say so in a dream. You were standing on the tall boat with the dark man, and you told him your name, *Fabhcun* means *falcon* in Gaeilgen.”

“The dark man...” Rhyden said, stunned nearly breathless, realizing Temuchin meant Aedhir. *The vision I had, when I saw this boy aboard the ship, I was talking to Aedhir. I was telling him what my name meant.*

“You saw me there,” Temuchin said, his voice quiet, his fingertips brushing against the cup of Rhyden’s palm. “Did you not? You turned to me, and I thought you saw me.”

“I saw you, yes,” Rhyden whispered. *How is that possible? Trejaeran had not restored the sight within me yet, and besides, this boy is not even an Elf!*

Temuchin smiled at him. “Yeb says that you are like us—me and him. That you have hiimori, the shaman’s gift, and you can see things—spirits and visions.”

Hiimori? Rhyden stared at Temuchin in dumfounded shock.

“He says you have a very powerful utha suld,” Temuchin told him. “An endur, one of the sky spirits. He told me your endur called to him in Capua, and led him and Mamma to the catasta to find you. He says it wanted them to find you—for you to come with us.”

“Catasta?” Rhyden whispered. He knew what a catasta was well enough, and suddenly he recalled again the horrifying, stinking den, the platform, the frigid air, voices shouting and laughing in a dizzying din around him, and the woman, Aigiarn looking up at him, her eyes filled with sorrow and pity. “Your mother found me at a catasta?”

“Do you not remember?” Temuchin asked him, his brows lifting with concern at Rhyden’s stricken expression.

Look at you... Rhyden remembered a voice, an unfamiliar, raspy woman’s voice in his ear, a hand sliding between his legs, stroking him. *So lovely.*

He remembered a man smiling at him, a man with dark hair caught back in a silver-streaked braid

Mongo Boldry

smiling as he gripped the strap of a belt in his mouth, drawing it tightly about Rhyden’s arm. Rhyden remembered the wink of lantern light against a long needle, a glass syringe filled with some sort of anonymous liquid, and Mongo Boldry sliding the needle into his arm, injecting the liquid into him. *Hush now...there you go.*

Rhyden jerked his hand away from Temuchin, startling the boy with the abrupt motion. He held out his right arm, shoving the blankets from his torso and letting them fall in rumpled folds about his hips. His Elfin healing had already tended to the puncture wound where the needle had entered him, but he could still see a small spot of faint discoloration, a ghost-like bruise to mark its place.

“Mathair Maith!” he said softly. *Good Mother!* He remembered nearly everything now—sitting in the tavern with Aedhir over brimagues and toitins; Nimon Hodder and the sailors from the *a’Maorga* luring Aedhir away with tales of a drunken, inconsolable crewman; Hodder offering apologies—and Rhyden finding hope for himself in Hodder’s

seeming change of heart; the heat of the pub, the sickening nausea that had all but crippled him, and Mongo Boldry leading him gently, insistently to a back corner in the tavern.

He looked at Temuchin, aghast. *Mother Above, they bought me at a slave auction, he thought in despair. Hodder and Boldry kidnapped me and these people, these Oirat bought me because they think I am some sort of guide, something promised to them in prophecies or lore, someone to lead them to this dragons' lair.*

There were no dragons in the Morthir anymore. During his first years as ambassador in Cneas, Rhyden had accompanied a legion of Torachan soldiers into northern Lydia. Here, he had visited and camped for a time with a tribe of native Lydians called the l'uitan. The l'uitan had lived in the foothills of the western Khar mountains for millennia, and they had brought Rhyden into the mountains to show him a dragon. It had been dead, of course, its body encased and preserved by tons of snow and ice plains along the slopes. The l'uitan had told Rhyden that the dragon had died thousands of years earlier, by their legends, when the great beasts had filled the sky one morning in some sort of massive migration. They had all disappeared into the Khar mountains—thousands of dragons—never to be seen again.

“Are they all dead?” Rhyden had whispered, on his knees in the snow, staring in breathless wonder at the great beast frozen into the landscape, its ancient, cerulean hide withered but still intact.

“No, he says they are sleeping,” said one of the Torachan soldiers, who was able to translate their l'uitan guide's unfamiliar, guttural language for Rhyden. “They are sleeping under the mountains, he said—deep beneath the mountains—waiting for the one to wake them up.”

“The one?” Rhyden had asked, glancing over his shoulder, curious.

“He is saying *negh*,” the soldier had replied. “I think it is a variation on *neghan*, or *one*.”

The l'uitan were gone from Lydia, their small villages and mountainside encampments eventually overtaken by the Torachans; their gentle, humble people sold into slavery as exotic acquisitions for imperial noblemen. None remained, but apparently their legends and lore did, and the Oirat still believed in them. He could tell that simply

by the earnest look on Temuchin's face as he spoke—the Oirat still believed in the old stories.

And they think I can lead them there, Rhyden thought. Mother Above, they are all mad! They do not want me to help them break free from the empire. They want something even more impossible—they want me to find bloody dragons for them!

“Temuchin, I told you to stay away from him,” Aigiarn said sharply from behind the boy. Rhyden looked up, startled from his thoughts and found the woman leaning beneath the canopy, her brows drawn sternly. She was flanked by Toghrul to her left, and the man in the yellow vest, Yeb to her right. Yeb cradled something against his forearms, some sort of small metal box with a stone lid affixed to it with gilded hinges.

Temuchin hunched his shoulders, unhappily. “We were just talking, Mamma,” he said quietly. “He was telling me about Elves...about their fingers and ears.”

“Temuchin,” she said, grasping him firmly by the shoulder. “Go to your pallet and stay there. Do not come out until I tell you to. If you disobey me again and approach the Elf, you will spend a week in the ger at the aysil—no hunting, no playing—chores and home, that is all. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mamma,” Temuchin said, sighing as he rose to his feet. He glanced at his mother as he walked past her, his head hung, his footsteps trudging. “He was being nice to me. He did not—”

“Temu—now,” Aigiarn said, the furrow between her brows deepening.

“I am going,” he mumbled, shuffling off toward the stern of the boat.

When the boy was gone, Aigiarn returned her attention to Rhyden. “May we sit with you in counsel?”

Rhyden blinked at her, bewildered. “Yes,” he said. He watched as Aigiarn sat before him, with Toghrul and Yeb at either side, all facing him. Rhyden looked at them for a long, uncertain moment. Along with his memories came a new sense of trepidation. He did not understand their intentions, except that they expected him to be some prophesized guide to them, and he felt uneasy in their presence.

“You bought me,” Rhyden said to Aigiarn at length. “At a slave auction in Capua.”

“I did, yes.”

“Why?”

“Because we need your help,” she said. She glanced at Yeb, and the man set the metal box on the furs in front of him. As he lifted up the lid and reached inside the box, Rhyden gasped, realizing the lid was the piece of stone Yeb had told him about at the waterfront—the ancient and mysterious fragment of an inscribed Abhacan threshold, marked with what Rhyden believed to be the Abhacan’s talismanic Seal of the Seven.

“Hoah...” Rhyden breathed, his wariness suddenly yielding to wonder. At his soft voice, Yeb looked up at him and smiled gently, meeting his excited gaze. “That is it?” Rhyden asked. “That is the fragment of stone your father found, the one you showed me a rubbing of?”

“Yes, Rhyden,” Yeb said.

“Hoah...” Rhyden whispered again, and he leaned forward. “I knew it was real. I tried to tell Aedhir—you cannot fake this. Not eighth dynastic inscriptions—not the Seal of the Seven.” He brushed his fingertips against it and looked at Yeb again. “You know where this came from, do you not? You lied to me at the wharf.”

“No,” Yeb said. “I did not lie to you. I told you it came from somewhere in the Khar mountains, and it did. I was hoping...” He cut his eyes toward Aigiarn and Toghrul. “We were hoping that you could tell us beyond this.”

Rhyden watched, confused, as Yeb drew a small, folded piece of parchment from the box. He unfolded it carefully and offered it to Rhyden. Rhyden glanced over his shoulder at Aigiarn and Toghrul, uncertain.

“It is alright,” Yeb said quietly, drawing his gaze.

Rhyden took the parchment from Yeb’s outstretched fingers. He stared at it in sudden, absolute shock, his breath tangling in his throat. The small series of rune characters carved into the wood were pale and paltry comparisons to what had been written on the page. Someone had drawn what appeared to be a very simplistic map, a tangled mess of lines and hatchmarks with no labels and no indication or compass rose to mark north from south. However, the margins of the pages were crammed with line after line inscribed in the delicate, ancient script of the eighth dynastic Chegney alphabet. Rhyden’s hands trembled with awe as he held the parchment toward the light; he gasped quietly, tracing his fingertips against the page.

“Who wrote this?” he whispered.

“My father did,” Yeb replied. “A yeke shaman of the Naiman tribe named bugu Inalchuk.”

“That is not possible,” Rhyden said. “The Abhacan themselves have not used these rune characters in millennia—the fourth dynastic transitory runes for even longer than that.”

“Inalchuk was part of a group selected to go into the Khar mountains many long years ago,” Yeb said. “He was the only one of twenty-seven men to survive the journey. He returned to us a year later, and we thought he had gone mad. He spoke only this language.” Yeb tapped the edge of the map. “Our shamans believe he was able to channel the restless gazriin ezen—or earthen spirit—of an ancient Abhacan mage to lead his party into the mountains. My father was the most powerful shaman the Oirat have ever known. The hiimori within his spirit was like no other, but this gazriin ezen was even stronger. It overpowered him. It broke his mind, possessed him fully. He only lived three days upon his return. He made this map for us, but we have never known what it says.”

Hiimori. The boy, Temuchin had used this term with Rhyden. *Yeb says that you are like us—me and him, he had said. That you have hiimori, the shaman’s gift, and you can see things—spirits and visions.*

Rhyden looked at Yeb. *It cannot be, he thought. Mother Above, it is not possible! They are of the race of men. It was a gift only for the Elves, and Trejaeran stripped it from us. He only gave it back to me and Qynh. It cannot be. They cannot possess the sight.*

“Can you read the map?” Aigiarn asked. “Can you tell us what it says?”

Rhyden did not look at her; he kept his gaze fixed on Yeb. *If I read it, where will it lead me?* he thought.

Yeb smiled at him again, the corner of his narrow, full mouth lifting gently. *You already know where it will lead you,* his voice said within Rhyden’s mind, and Rhyden recoiled, his eyes flown wide, his breath escaping his throat in an incredulous gasp.

“Ta...ta se dodheanta...!” Rhyden whispered in Gaeilgen. *It is impossible!*
It will lead you into the mountains, Yeb said. It will lead you to the dragons’ lair.

Chapter Two

The knarr came aground on a silty beach on the shores of northern Torach, a muddy stretch that yielded to pine forests tangled with underbrush and cragged outcroppings of bedrock. Rhyden remained seated beneath the canopy at the stern of the boat, even as he watched the Oirat men begin to disembark, hopping nimbly over the sides of the knarr, their heavy boots splashing loudly in the shallow water along the lip of the sea.

He had listened in stunned, bewildered disbelief to Aigiarn, Yeb and Toghrul until only a few moments before the keel of the longboat had slid against the soft ground of the shore. While Aigiarn was clearly the leader among the Oirat, she had deferred much of the conversation to Yeb. Yeb had explained to Rhyden that like his father, he was considered a yeke shaman, and with that distinction came the responsibility of familiarity with the Oirat's lengthy and considerable history.

Yeb had made no further effort to speak with Rhyden in his mind, but Rhyden was still reeling and confused from even the brief measure of their rapport. There seemed no logical explanation for the incident, except that somehow, somehow, the menfolk of the Oirat—or at least, certain members of them—held a telepathic and empathic ability very similar to the Elfin gift of sight. In their language, it was called hiimori, and apparently, unlike the Elves, it was something that had never waned within them.

Yeb had told Rhyden of the origins of the dragon legend, the story of two princes, Dobun and Duua, and how the treachery of a deceitful queen named Mongoljin had ultimately led to the betrayal not only of Dobun, the throne's rightful heir, but the race of dragons as well.

"The baga'han were friends of our people," Yeb had said. "Even in the mightiest days of our ancient empire, under the reign of the yeke Kagan Borjigidal—father to Dobun and Duua—the baga'han were allowed to keep their lands westward and into the Khar mountains. When Borjigidal died, and his dragon, Ag'iamon was poisoned, it was to a baga'han mage that Ag'iamon turned to see the dragons of Ulus hidden and safe.

Only this mage knew the lair's location. It is said he willingly cut out his own tongue and crippled his hands in fire so that he could not tell or write of it. When he died, the lair was lost with him, and his suld spirit was rewarded for his services and sacrifices by being elevated to gazriin ezen, an earth spirit guardian embodied by the breadth of the Khar mountains themselves.

"It was this spirit that my father, Inalchuk channeled; this gazriin ezen that led him to the lair, gave him the language of the ancients to read the inscribed seal marking the threshold. The stone on this box is a piece my father removed from the threshold as proof that he discovered it. Unfortunately, the gazriin ezen's power is also what killed my father—leaving us only with this."

Rhyden had stared at him, still cradling the map that Yeb pointed to between his hands. *They are all mad*, he thought. Yeb said nothing within his mind, but he had smiled softly at Rhyden, his brows lifting sympathetically, as though he had overheard.

"You will translate the map for us," Aigiarn said.

"What?" Rhyden had asked, startled.

"You will translate the map," she said again. "You speak the Abhacan tongue, the language of the baga'han. We know the area of the mountains this drawing represents. The course to the lair is in the text. Translate it for us, and I will see you returned to Capua and your friends."

He had been stricken. "But I...I cannot..."

"You read the engravings on the stone," Aigiarn said.

"Two words," Rhyden said. "Two simple words relatively unchanged throughout history. I am not fluent in Chegney. I am not even moderately literate in it. I can speak it conversationally, recognize common enough words, but I...I..."

He stared down at the map, dismayed. "There are runes on this page I have never even seen before, character combinations and dialectal punctuations that are completely unfamiliar. If they are using transitory runes predating the fourth dynasty, it would take me years to translate this, if even then."

He looked up at her. "Take me back to Capua. My friend Aedhir—his frigate is very swift. We could go to Tirurnua in no time, the realm of the Abhacan in Tiralainn. We could go there together—you and me—and we could bring this to Iarnrod, to the

Abhacan scribes. They could translate some of it for you, much of it, I am certain. More than I could ever—”

“No,” Aigiarn said. “We are not going back to Capua. We are going north and you are going to translate the map.”

“If I had a full century, I could not do this.”

“You do not have a century,” Aigiarn told him, her brows drawn, her mouth turned in a frown. “You have thirteen days.”

Rhyden nearly choked. “Thirteen days?” he gasped, wide-eyed. “Hoah—you cannot honestly mean to—”

“We will reach Tolui Bay off the Chagan Sea in thirteen days,” she said. “Translate the map, and I will see you back to Capua from there.”

She is mad, Rhyden thought. “And if I do not?”

She stood, ducking her head to avoid toppling the canopy. She glowered at Rhyden, her hands closing into fists. “Then I will sell your sorry Elf-hide to some lecherous hog of a Torachan nobilissimus,” she seethed. “And get back the thirty thousand dorotus I wasted on you.”

She turned smartly on her boot heel and stomped across the deck, her long braid trailing behind her, slapping against her hips. Toghrul stood and followed, sparing a dark glance at Rhyden as he left. Only Yeb had remained, and Rhyden looked at him helplessly.

“I cannot do this,” he said. “Please, can you not speak with her? It is impossible. I cannot do it, not in thirteen days—not in thirteen lifetimes!”

“You have not even tried,” Yeb told him with a smile. He stood, lowering his head and backing out from beneath the tarp. “How do you know?”

They are all mad, Rhyden thought, dismayed, watching Yeb walk away. *Mathair Maith—all of them. Bloody damn mad.*

Once the knarr was aground, Toghrul and two of his Oirat guards walked along the deck toward Rhyden. Rhyden watched their approach warily; all three now wore well-stocked quivers strapped between their shoulders, and broad-armed, heavy bows

across their backs. Toghrul kept his hand planted firmly against the pommel of his sword, his brows furrowed, his expression set in an unfriendly glower.

“Get up,” Toghrul said to him. He turned to one of the guards, taking a bundle of rolled hides from him. He thrust the bundle at Rhyden, who caught it between his hands, bewildered and startled. “We have found some clothing for you, and some gutal that should fit. You can dress on shore.”

“Thank you,” Rhyden said. He stood, cradling the clothes against his chest with the crook of one elbow, using his hands to keep the folds of blankets in place about his shoulders. Toghrul stepped aside as Rhyden ducked beneath the edge of the canopy. Rhyden followed the guards to the side of the knarr while Toghrul walked behind him, his hand never relaxing his grip upon the sword.

Rhyden swung his legs one at a time over the side of the boat, dropping down into the shallow water. He felt his feet sink into the soft mud beneath him, the silt squelching between his toes, and he sucked in a sharp, hissing breath against the frigid bite of the water. Toghrul’s boots slapped against the surf behind him, and Rhyden felt his elbow shove roughly against his back, prodding him forward.

“Move,” Toghrul said.

He was angry with Rhyden. Toghrul and Aigiarn both were surly toward him now. He had not given them the answers they had wanted to hear; he had shattered their illusions of him as some sort of divinely proffered guide. Aigiarn had been visibly startled and taken aback by Rhyden’s insistence that he could not translate the map, and he knew this was not a possibility that had ever occurred to her. She doubted him now; worse than that in her regard, Rhyden realized Aigiarn doubted herself, her decisions, the prophecies and legends that had driven the Oirat to determined, desperate survival for so long.

The guards led Rhyden into the woods. He caught sight of Temuchin standing at the edge of the water by himself, away from the company of his mother, Yeb and the other Oirat. Temuchin bounced a small ball against the top of his boot. He balanced easily on one foot to accomplish this, and canted his ankle on occasion to bat the ball with the side of his foot. He shifted his weight with the ball in midair, catching it against his opposite foot, beginning the little game anew.

If they go into the mountains, he will die. The words came to Rhyden out of nowhere, and he nearly stumbled, startled and disturbed. It did not feel like a supposition within his heart, something that might happen. It felt true to him, like the sight offering a premonition.

Temuchin glanced at Rhyden, his young face troubled. He knew what had transpired, what Rhyden had told Aigiarn, but if he was disappointed in these revelations, they did not reflect in his countenance. He softened to see Rhyden, his mouth unfolding in a smile and Rhyden struggled to smile back, the grim words still echoing in his mind.

If they go into the mountains, he will die.

“What about the boy?” he said to Toghrul.

“What about him?” Toghrul replied, his tone curt and guarded.

Rhyden looked over his shoulder. “Why is Temuchin with you? It is a long voyage by sea from your land, and probably a difficult, if not dangerous trip into the Khar mountains.”

“Do not worry for Temuchin,” Toghrul said. “He is none of your concern.”

They had made their way through the trees and came to a halt in a narrow clearing framed by broad pine trunks, carpeted in dried needles and fallen cones. The air was thick and heady with the fragrance of pine-sap and Rhyden turned his gaze upward, admiring the view of the expansive, towering boughs above.

“Dress yourself,” Toghrul said from behind him. “We will not be ashore long.”

The two Oirat guards turned away from Rhyden as he lowered the blankets from his shoulders and began to dress, stepping into the borrowed wool leggings and drawing them up his hips. Toghrul remained facing him, seeming neither affected nor embarrassed by Rhyden’s nudity and oblivious to any modesty Rhyden might have exhibited. Toghrul kept his brows furrowed, his mouth set in a frown, his hand upon the hilt of his sword.

“Are you not worried for him?” Rhyden asked, glancing at Toghrul. He shrugged a heavy hide robe over his shoulders. They had offered him no shirt or underleine to wear beneath it, but he realized the exterior was well-insulated, lined with some sort of soft, thick animal fur. It was double-breasted to contain further warmth against the

chest; two loops of tanned hide, fettered about a pair of elongated wooden buttons on the right shoulder held the robe closed at the top while a broad woolen sash wound about his waist kept it in place and closed at the bottom. “Temuchin, I mean.”

“He is supposed to be with us,” Toghrul said. “This journey is for him. You are the one who is supposed to lead us to the dragons.” At this, he snorted dubiously. “But Temuchin is the one who shall wake them, call them from the lair. He is the Negh—heir of Dobun, and Lord of dragons and men, the one Ag’iamon promised us would come and restore our people, our empire.”

Rhyden fell still, his hands poised and unmoving against the sash at his waist. He remembered his visit to Lydia so many years ago, when the l’uitan had brought him in the mountains, awarding him with a rare and stunning glimpse of a dead dragon, frozen into the edge of a glacier.

He says they are sleeping, the Torachan soldier had said, translating for their guide. They are sleeping under the mountains, he said—deep beneath the mountains—waiting for the one to wake them up. He is saying negh—I think it is a variation of neghan, or one.

This is madness, Rhyden thought. How can they not see that? They would bring Temuchin into the mountains—a little boy, for the love of the Good Mother—chasing a legend.

He stared at Toghrul. Temuchin would not live through that. None of them would. They would freeze to death in the Khar mountains. He would let his son die to try and prove a legend true.

He could not be a part of it. Rhyden had only recently realized for himself the futile efforts of fifteen years wasted chasing after similar legends. He had believed the Book of Shadows a threat to his people, the Shadow Stone a talisman of insurmountable evil. When Trejaeran had died, the Book had been rendered worthless words inscribed on parchment; the Stone had proven no more evil than the hand it chose to bear it. Rhyden’s life, his soul still bore the scars of such misguided beliefs, and he could not do it again. Too many lives had been lost for the legends of Tiralainn. He had lost Trejaeran to them, his best friend, his brother in all but blood. He had lost a

part of himself with Trejaeran, a part of his heart, his soul had died for nothing more than ancient lore.

The Oirat were a desperate and misinformed people, and Temuchin was a child—a kind-hearted and trusting boy who believed, as they did, that ancient, half-forgotten lore was prophesized destiny. They expected Rhyden to direct them on this journey, but he could not do it. Rhyden doubted he could translate their map of the Khar mountains, but all at once, it did not matter. He thought of Temuchin smiling at him, cradling his hand between his own, marveling over his Elfin fingers, and his heart ached with sudden, profound sorrow.

I cannot do this, he thought. It is all madness and I cannot send these people to their deaths. I will not send Temuchin into the mountains to die. Not for this—not for a legend.

Rhyden lowered himself slowly to the ground, sitting in the soft blanket of pine needles beneath him, with his knees drawn toward his chest. He lifted one of the heavy hide boots in his hands and tucked his foot into the high cuff. He glanced up and found Toghrul still regarding him. He did a quick visual assessment of Toghrul's weapons—dagger, sword, bow—and then looked down at his feet again.

If I leave, they can go no further. They think they need me to read the map. If I do not translate it for them—if I run away—they will have no choice. They will return to Ulus.

He was surrounded by trees, with laden pine boughs that would offer him camouflage and cover if he could break away from Toghrul and the guards long enough to climb one. The Gaeilge Elves had made lives in the trees for themselves ages ago; up until recent decades, his parents' Elfin sect, the Donnag'crann had continued this arboreal tradition and lifestyle. Like any Gaeilge, Rhyden was a skilled climber, able to traverse even the most narrow and treacherous of limbs without stirring a leaf or bending a bough; to move as though weightless, as nimble as a young squirrel through even the loftiest crowns.

If he could reach the trees, he could lose them. He could get high enough to be out of effective range of their bows, and he could climb among the treetops, following the forest along the ocean shore until they were far behind him. It would be a difficult

trek by foot along the Torachan coast back to Capua, but if he could find a town or village along the way, even a rudimentary encampment, he might be able to send word by courier falcon to Aedhir.

If he was going to climb, he would need his feet bare. Like his fingers, Rhyden's toes were elongated and prehensile; his ancestors, who had lived among the trees had seldom known need for foot coverings or shoes. Rhyden pulled the boot away from his foot with a dramatic frown, letting his brows furrow.

"What is it?" Toghrul asked.

"They do not fit," Rhyden said. It was not a lie; he could tell simply by looking at the gutal that they would not fit his long, narrow feet. "They are too small."

"We will find you some others, then," Toghrul said.

"I have always had trouble finding—" Rhyden began, and then his hands darted to his face and he cried out sharply, doubling at the waist as though seized with sudden, excruciating pain.

"What is it?" Toghrul said, springing forward in alarm.

Rhyden cried out again, throwing his head back and shoving the heels of his hands against his eyes. "My head!" he cried. "Oh, Sweet Mother!"

He collapsed onto his back on the ground, arching his spine, writhing in apparent torment. The other two Oirat guards rushed toward him, and he heard the loud rustling of needles as Toghrul fell on his knees beside him.

"What is wrong?" Toghrul exclaimed, seizing Rhyden by the shoulders. He looked up at one of the guards. "Go get bugu Yeb—get him now!"

Rhyden waited until he heard the sound of the guard running away from them, ducking through the trees and heading for the beach once more and then he moved. He rolled his hips up from the ground, swinging his legs towards his shoulders. Toghrul recoiled in surprise at the sudden movement, but Rhyden clamped his knees about the man's neck, throttling him. Rhyden swung his hips down again, using the strength in his legs, the momentum of his body to throw Toghrul off balance. Toghrul stumbled and then sprawled, toppling over Rhyden and crashing against the forest floor.

The remaining guard stood almost to Rhyden's immediate right, his eyes flown wide in shock at Rhyden's attack. Before he could recover from his surprise or reach for

his weapon, Rhyden snapped his right leg out, driving his heel into the side of the Oirat's right knee. The Oirat yelled in pain, staggering sideways, his injured leg buckling beneath his weight. Rhyden rolled onto his stomach, sweeping out with his left leg as he moved, clipping the guard's ankle, knocking him off balance. The man fell to the ground, and Rhyden scrambled to his feet, bolting for the nearest tree.

"Stop!" he heard Toghrul shout out from behind him.

Rhyden leaped for the lowest hanging bough, hooking his hands about it, hoisting himself up. He let his feet settle for no more than a second in full against the cragged surface of the branch and then he leaped again, grabbing the next bough above him, ascending rapidly into the heights of the tree.

He sprang from one tree to the next. These were venerable and enormous trees, with broad limbs perfect for an Elf to climb. He danced among the pines and towering sequoias for nearly ten minutes, darting in and among the branches, moving deeper and deeper into the forest. Needles and slender twigs whispered and slapped against his cheeks, his brow, tugged and tangled in his hair; his feet and hands found fleeting purchase against passing boughs and limbs as he moved swiftly, silently along.

At last Rhyden came to a halt, weary and winded. He pressed his shoulder against the wide, coarse trunk of a pine tree and huddled there, certain that he must have eluded any ground pursuit the Oirat might have offered. He balanced his weight on his toes and let his knees fold as he sank toward the base of the bough beneath him. He pressed his hands on the trunk, leaned his forehead against the tree. His heart was racing in frantic rhythm, his chest shuddered with frightened exertion, and Rhyden rested, closing his eyes, trying to reclaim his breath.

I will wait here, he thought. I will wait here until the sun goes down. They will search the forest for me, but they will not be able to see me up here. They will not linger after dark. At dusk, I can make my way down to the beach once more, and I can use the polar star to guide me, make my way south. I can—

He heard a sudden, hissing wind and jerked, his eyes flying wide in start. He recoiled, nearly toppling off the tree limb as an arrow slammed into the trunk scant inches from his face.

“Hoah—!” he cried, his fingertips hooked and scrabbling against the tree, groping to keep his balance. He whirled about, his eyes enormous.

It is not possible! he thought, stunned.

“Do not move,” Toghrul told him, nocking another arrow, poising it against his knuckle as he drew the bowstring back to his jaw. He stood behind Rhyden on the narrow beam of the bough, his feet planted steadily, his shoulders and hips squared, his brows furrowed as he gazed down the length of his bow arm, finding his mark in the middle of Rhyden’s forehead.

It is not possible! Rhyden thought. *How did he find me? How did he follow me?*

Toghrul balanced easily upon the tree limb, as poised as though he stood upon the ground—or shared an Elfin’s inherent equilibrium. He stepped forward slowly, not averting his eyes from Rhyden’s, or sparing even a glance toward his boots to check his footing. He moved gracefully, deliberately, holding his mark steady, his arms not wavering from his full draw on the bow.

“How...” Rhyden gasped, stumbling, his own Gaelige graces slapped from him in his shock. “How did you...?”

“If you run again, I will shoot you,” Toghrul said.

Rhyden held up his hands as Toghrul drew near and the tapered point of his arrow—a well-crafted, handmade tip of sharpened black stone—came within inches of his face.

“Let me go,” Rhyden whispered, staring at the arrow.

“No,” Toghrul said.

“Please,” Rhyden said. “Please do not do this. If you bring Temuchin into the mountains, he will die. Please.”

Toghrul hesitated, and something flashed in his eyes, across his face, a momentary uncertainty. It passed as quickly as it came, and his brows drew narrow again. “Get down on your knees.”

Rhyden swung his arm, battering aside the arrow. He grasped the arch of the bow spine in his fist and jerked his head to his shoulder, hearing the thrumming hiss of the hide bowstring as Toghrul, startled, released the line. He felt the stinging breeze of the arrow as it whipped past his face, through the tree boughs behind him, falling to the

ground below. Rhyden grabbed the upper bow limb with his free hand and yanked the bow toward him, wrenching it to the right in the same motion to loosen Toghrul's hand.

As Toghrul reflexively turned loose of the bow, stumbling forward and off-balance, his wrist and elbow suddenly extended at an unnatural inward angle. Rhyden swung the lower arm of the bow up in his fist, driving it solidly against the side of Toghrul's head. Toghrul staggered, his boots skittering from the margin of bough and he fell sideways, toppling toward the ground.

Rhyden had a quick moment to glimpse Toghrul snatch hold of a branch below them, his hands clamping desperately at the tree limb, his legs pinwheeling in the open air, and then Rhyden whirled, casting aside the bow and darting through the trees again. He sprang toward a neighboring tree, feeling wind against his face and then the fluttering of pine needles. He ducked his head and raced along the bough, hooking the trunk against his palm and swinging around, taking a broad, bold stride and leaping to the next tree's nearest branches.

He made it perhaps another five minutes, a scarce lead over Toghrul and then his foot settled against the beam of a limb that had seemed sturdy enough from his fleeting, frantic glimpse, but instead, turned out to be rotted to the core. The moment Rhyden's weight settled on it, the bough cracked. He felt it collapse beneath him, and he uttered a startled yelp as he abruptly fell. Tree branches and twigs slapped against him, and Rhyden flailed his hands, struggling to grab a limb and stay his fall. His splayed fingers slapped against passing boughs without success; he snatched one long enough to slow the alarming rate of his plummet—and long enough to realize the disease that had ruined the branch he had landed on had effected the entire tree as well. It was dying; he could sense it in his mind through the sight, like a shadow or cloud, and as he felt this sensation within him, radiating through his hands from the tree, the limb he had grabbed snapped in half, spilling him toward the ground again.

He hit the forest floor with enough force to pummel the breath from his lungs. He cracked the side of his head against an exposed elbow of root, sending miniscule stars dancing before his eyes. He bounced like a discarded rag doll tossed into a corner, and he pitched over the side of a steep embankment beneath the tree. He rolled and tumbled, his mouth filling with dirt; he felt his shoulder crack against a corner of stone,

his hip slap against a tangled outcropping of thick roots, and then he smacked face-first into the icy waters of a shallow, slow-moving stream.

Rhyden sat up, shoving his hands beneath him and jerking his head out of the frigid water, his eyes flown wide, his mouth opened as he sucked in a loud, whooping breath. “Hoah—!” he gasped, reeling dizzily. He splashed about helplessly, trying to scuttle backwards out of the water and settled for resting on his knees in the stream, panting, aching, his head spinning. He closed his eyes, moaning as he clapped his hand against his ear, cupping his fingers against the tender, battered portion of his skull that had struck the tree root.

“Rhyden, what are you doing?”

Rhyden opened his eyes and blinked dazedly, lifting his head. He was not completely surprised to see Trejaeran Muirel standing before him, up to the ankles of his boots in the stream, even though he had not seen the apparition of his friend since the night of the storm at sea. Rhyden had struck his head mightily; he was amazed he did not see denizens of Tirmaithe prancing and capering about him in the water.

“I...I am running away, bidein,” he croaked. He rose clumsily to his feet, staggering in place. He pulled his hand away from his head and when he found blood smeared upon his palm, his fingertips, he moaned again, softly.

“Where are you running to?” Trejaeran asked.

“I...I have to get back to Capua,” Rhyden said. “Aedhir...he is still there, and he...he is looking for me. I...I know he is.” He stumbled, falling to his knees in the water with a loud splash, and he groaned, cradling his hand against his head.

“Aedhir has his own destiny to worry about,” Trejaeran told him gently, squatting before Rhyden, resting his elbows against his knees. “And you have yours, Rhyden.”

Rhyden lowered his head, feeling dizzy and weak. “I...I have to go back.”

“You will never make it to Capua, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said, drawing his bewildered gaze. Trejaeran smiled at him, reaching out, cradling the back of Rhyden’s head against his hand. “They will know who you are and they will stop you.”

“I can outrun them,” Rhyden said. “I...I can outrun the Oirat.”

Trejaeran pressed his hand against the back of Rhyden’s head, turning his face gently down toward the water. “I do not mean the Oirat.”

Rhyden blinked at his reflection in the water. The stream moved about him in a slow, swirling current, but he could still see his face, shimmering in the sunlight, dancing across the surface. For the first time, he could see what he had forgotten—the only memory his mind had spared him—and he uttered a soft, anguished gasp.

Lay him back, Mongo Boldry had said. Tulien, bring me that light. I will mark him.

A long, broad, dark line followed the contour of his browline and cheek nearly to his jaw. From this stretched another indigo slash, one that draped itself against the arch of his cheek, hooking up as if it meant to cradle the socket of his eye. Two more thick lines framed his brow from above, one atop the other, and together, the marks made a solitary character, some sort of roughly sketched rune—the tattooed mark of Mongo Boldry's catasta.

"It is the mark of a slave," Trejaeran told him, but Rhyden knew this on his own. He had seen similar marks plenty of times in Cneas. "Wherever you go in the empire, Rhyden, people will know that mark, what it means—what you are."

Rhyden lowered his hand slowly toward the stream, watching as his fingers trembled, nearly numb with cold. It seemed a lifetime ago—and not only two nights—that he had stood in his stateroom aboard the *a'Maorga*, covering a mirror with his hand, wishing for a stranger's visage to greet him when he drew his fingers away. He touched the water now, watching concentric circles bob about his fingertips, turning his reflection—this person he did not recognize—into nothing but flutters of sunlight against water.

"They will take you back to the catasta," Trejaeran said. "There is no place to run with that mark on you. They will find you and they will sell you again."

"No," Rhyden whispered.

"Yes, Rhyden," Trejaeran said. "You know I am right. You cannot go back. Go with the Oirat—with the boy, Temuchin."

"No," Rhyden said. He shook his head. "No, I will not. I...I cannot."

"Temuchin needs you. He is special, Rhyden—more special than you can realize yet. He needs you to lead them into the mountains."

“It is a foolish legend that leads them, not me,” Rhyden said. He looked up at Trejaeran, his eyes filled with grief. “I cannot lead Temuchin to his death. He is a good boy. His heart is decent and kind. I know it is. I can sense it.”

“I know you can,” Trejaeran said gently.

“I have seen too many die for believing in such things,” Rhyden said. “I have wasted my own life believing ancient riddles and stories as though they were true. You died for a legend, bidein. And in the end...it has been for nothing. It has always been for nothing.”

Trejaeran smiled. “No, Rhyden,” he said softly, hooking his hand against the back of Rhyden’s neck. “It has not.”

Rhyden blinked at him, confused, and Trejaeran smiled all the more.

“Duck,” he said, drawing Rhyden’s forehead toward the stream again.

Rhyden had barely tucked his head, his nose dropping to the water when he felt the flutter of wind through feather fletchings against his hair. He heard a sharp, shrill screech from his left, like a furious woman shrieking, and he cowered, throwing his arms up as something thick, hot and wet slapped across his cheek in a sudden, startling spatter. There was a loud splash; icy water from the stream doused the leg of his pants, his arm and Rhyden lowered his arms, risking a glance.

An enormous animal lay sprawled in the water near him with an arrow buried in its skull nearly halfway along the length of its thick shaft. Blood pooled in the water around the animal’s head, swirling in the current in dark, grizzly spirals, and Rhyden stared at it, wide-eyed and shocked. He had never seen anything like the creature in his life; it was nearly six feet long from snout to tail, a brawny animal, with long, thick limbs, massive paws, a broad, muscular neck and a large, wide head. Its ears were relatively small in proportion, pointed sharply; its mouth wide and lined with long, curved teeth. It had white markings around its short, stocky snout and eyes, and the rest of its course hide was a mottled blend of russet and black fur. Its forepaws, which lay sprawled in the water within inches of Rhyden’s knees as if it reached for him, had prehensile, thumb-like extensions, and all of its digits were hooked with thick, wicked-looking claws.

The arrow had pierced its brain, lodging deep within the broad base of the creature's nose, and it gazed at him, its amber colored eyes open and fixed on him, its body still in the water.

"Hoah..." Rhyden whispered. He turned to his right and saw Toghrul standing in the streambed, staring at Rhyden, his face stricken, his eyes wide. He held his bow poised in his right hand before him and had already nocked another arrow against the string. He walked slowly, silently, his boots not seeming to disturb the water at all as he approached. His gaze darted between Rhyden and the animal. Trejaeran was gone—if he had ever been there at all—and Rhyden was left alone to face the sharp point of Toghrul's arrow.

"Get up," Toghrul hissed, cutting his eyes toward Rhyden. His aim shifted, and the arrow swung at Rhyden's forehead again. "Get up. Right now."

Toghrul had watched the Elf fall from the pine tree. He had only just barely recovered from his own near-tumble; like most Oirat men, Toghrul was an exceptionally skilled climber. The style of Ulusian hunting technique—called battue—used in the woodlands remained relatively unchanged, despite millennia of practice by both the Oirat and the Khahl. While hunting on the open steppe plains called for the swiftness of bergelmirs or horses, hunting among the trees had called for stealth as well as speed, and the hoyin'irgen were a specific group of hunters who kept silently to the treetops to kill, while others on steeds or foot drove prey in great sweeping efforts toward their readied bows.

Toghrul had been stunned nearly immobile when the Elf had attacked him and darted for the trees. He had watched the Elf leap into the air like a nubile young cat, clambering swiftly into the pine boughs and disappearing from view with scarcely a sound. Torachan men could not duplicate the arboreal acrobatics and grace of Ulusian hoyin'irgen. They were by far too sedentary a people to ever find the coordination within their idle limbs. They hunted like children, plowing through the forests on their noisy, tromping horses, with their baying hounds and their horns. An animal would have to be stupid—or deaf—to miss their approach and be caught in the open by their wayward arrows.

The Elf had not moved like a Torachan; he had moved with the agility and speed of an Ulusian. Toghrul had managed to galvanize himself into motion, following the Elf into the trees, but he had been astonished and confounded—and rendered breathless with exertion besides—at the Elf’s swift pace, his sure footing, his seemingly silent and weightless passage among the boughs and limbs. He had nearly admired the Elf for his efforts—that is, until the bastard had hit him in the head and damn near lost his favorite bow. He had tossed it after knocking Toghrul from the limb; Toghrul had seen the bow tumble, and kicked his leg out wildly, snagging his foot between bow arm and string, rescuing the weapon.

He had recovered the bow, reclaimed his footing on the nearest limb and resumed his chase. He had been only one sequoia over from the Elf when Rhyden’s foot had settled on a rotten branch. Toghrul had heard the grinding snap of withered wood, and then the Elf had uttered a startled cry as he had spilled to the ground. He had hit hard, tumbling against the forest floor and pitching over a steep embankment below them, into a streambed. Toghrul had followed, climbing down from the tree, his gutal dropping without even a rustle against the dried pine needles covering the ground.

He climbed carefully down the slope of the streambed, approaching Rhyden from around a slight bend that offered him some cover. He slipped an arrow from his quiver, letting his gloved fingertips slide against the trimmed feather fletchings as he nocked it in place. Creeping like a cat, his boots cleaving quiet paths in the water, Toghrul made his way around the crook of the stream. He drew his bow arm before him, pulling back against the bowstring until his fingertips were nearly parallel to the juncture of his cheek and jaw.

The Elf was talking to himself, rambling inanely. Toghrul watched as he tried to stand, but reeled, collapsing to his knees in the water. *Maybe he is hurt*, Toghrul thought. *Or maybe it is another trick.*

“I can outrun them,” the Elf moaned softly, swaying unsteadily. “I...I can outrun the Oirat.”

No, you cannot, Elf, Toghrul thought, pausing in his stride and finding his mark along Rhyden’s right temple. “Do not move.”

If Rhyden heard him, he gave no outward indication. He stared down into the stream, his voice escaping him in a quiet cry. He brushed his fingertips against the water, his face stricken with shock. “No,” he whispered, and then he had glanced up, as though someone knelt before him in the water—someone Toghrul could not see. “No, no, I will not. I...I cannot.”

Yeb had told them the Elf was possessed of hiimori, the shaman’s gift, that he was guarded by an endur spirit. Toghrul wondered if he kept counsel with this spirit guide, or if it was just a ruse again, an attempt to draw Toghrul near enough to attack.

“Elf,” he said, trying to glean Rhyden’s attention. When this had no effect, he tried again, more sharply. “Elf!”

“It is a foolish legend that leads them, not me,” the Elf said, looking again into the open air as though he spoke with someone unseen. “I cannot lead Temuchin to his death. He is a good boy. His heart is decent and kind. I know it is. I can sense it.”

Toghrul gasped at his words; his aim wavered, and his draw loosened slightly. Only moments earlier, before the Elf had knocked him from the tree, he had told Toghrul something that had seized his heart, frightened him. *If you bring Temuchin into the mountains, he will die.*

Now, the Elf had mentioned Temuchin again. *What has he seen? Toghrul thought, aghast. What have his visions shown him? That Temu will die? It is not possible. Yeb would have seen something, sensed something so terrible. He never would have let us come—let Temuchin come. He would not have. It is not possible.*

“I have seen too many die for believing such things,” the Elf said. “I have wasted my own life believing ancient riddles and stories as though they were true. You died for a legend, bidein. And in the end...it has been for nothing. It has always been for nothing.”

There was such sorrow in Rhyden’s voice, such despair that Toghrul had let his aim falter all the more. He had been so startled and taken aback by the poignancy in the Elf’s words, his forlorn tone that he nearly missed sudden movement out of the left corner of his eye. He jerked his gaze and had only a fraction of a breath to realize a narsana had crept upon the Elf along the stream bank; an enormous male to judge by the flash of red fur Toghrul saw as the great beast leapt out of the bushy scrub and

underbrush alongside the water, its huge paws outstretched and splayed, its thumb-claws hooked and poised to seize the Elf about the throat.

“No!” Toghrul cried, drawing his bow arm to the ready, pulling back in full on the bowstring. He let his arrow fly, his eyes taking less than a full second to find a mark, and the narsana jerked in mid-flight, its body wrenching sideways as the arrow caught it squarely between the eyes. It shrieked, a piercing, agonized sound and then crashed into the water, its brain punctured.

Rhyden stared at the narsana for a long, stunned moment, then turned to Toghrul, seeming to notice him for the first time. He was ashen, his eyes enormous with shock, his face spattered with narsana blood. Toghrul reached over his shoulder, drawing another arrow from his quiver and nocking it into place. He walked slowly around Rhyden, aiming for the stilled beast. Narsana were known to play tricks, too, and he was taking no chances. They were fierce and fearless predators; a swift kiss of their thumb-claws could open a man’s throat like a heated knife through burlagh fat.

“Get up,” Toghrul hissed at the Elf. “Get up right now.”

The Elf blinked at him, uncertainly, and Toghrul averted his eyes from the narsana long enough to scowl at him. “They hunt in packs sometimes. Get up. If there are more of them, we are dead.”

Toghrul knelt briefly beside the dead animal, genuflecting and lowering his head without turning loose of his bow. “Uch’lara abciraqu ci ami an adag eyimu,” he whispered to the narsana. *I am sorry to bring your life end like this.* “Tere ayu keregtei ci ukuku. Amugu ba qarigqu, bokejin ba qui enq.” *It was necessary that you die. Sleep and return, strong one, and know peace.*

Narsana were territorial creatures; this one had likely staked out the stream, waiting patiently for oyotor’ghaqais or other ground-feeding rodents and animals to come along for a drink. It was unusual for even groups of narsana to attack prey as large as a full-grown man, but as the Elf rose to his feet, stumbling momentarily, Toghrul realized why the beast had been attracted to him. Rhyden had bludgeoned his head in his fall and there was blood smeared above his left ear. Because narsana often settled for scavenging in lieu of readily available quarry, they had acute senses of smell. If there were more of them about, they would draw the scent of the Elf’s blood from the

wind and come eagerly to investigate. Alarmed, he stepped toward the Elf, keeping his eyes wary upon the embankments around them, his hands poised on his bow, his fingers pinched lightly against the ferrule of his arrow.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

The Elf nodded, touching his fingertips gingerly against his injured temple. “I...I hit my head,” he said. “But I will be alright in...in a moment...”

“We do not have a moment,” Toghrul said. “Come on.”

“What did you say to it?” Rhyden asked, glancing at the narsana.

“I asked its forgiveness, that it might return to these woods in its next life without offense.”

“You saved my life,” Rhyden said softly.

“Yes, I did.” Toghrul spared Rhyden a dark look. “I may not next time. Do not run from me again.”

“I will not,” Rhyden said, meeting his gaze. “It would not do me much good anyway, would it?”

“No, it would not.”

They walked together, following the streambed back through the woods, making their way to the beach once more. The Elf seemed to gather his senses the more he was upright and mobile, as though the effects of his injuries waned with every passing moment. Toghrul did not understand it; he had feared the Elf might keel over in a dead faint, forcing Toghrul to lug him over his shoulder back to the knarr, leaving him unable to wield his bow in their defense.

“What was that thing?” Rhyden asked Toghrul, looking back over his shoulder, even though the dead narsana was now out of sight behind them. “A wolf of some sort? A hunting cat?”

He had been dazed as he knelt in the water while the narsana stalked him and somewhat groggy when they had started walking, but seemed perfectly coherent now. Toghrul kept awarding him bewildered, amazed glances, wondering what sort of magic allowed him to recover so swiftly.

“It was neither,” Toghrul said, and when Rhyden looked at him, he averted his gaze, sweeping his eyes along the nearby banks. “It was a narsana. They are

khoradil—animals that nurse their young in belly pouches. They have keen noses and sharp ears—so stop talking to me.”

Rhyden fell obligingly silent, and Toghrul marveled that his footsteps were unlike those of the clumsy, noisy Torachans. The Elf’s legs were long, his stride broad, but his feet fell softly, without a sound upon the ground—like an Oirat hunter’s. Toghrul did not appreciate finding things in common with the Elf. He had decided after their conversation on the knarr that the Elf was no less of a coward than any other pompous Torachan noble.

Rhyden had bleated like a distraught child when asked to read the map. He had not given it more than a fleeting glance before whining about impossibilities. Toghrul had made up his mind not to like him, and his opinion had been fairly well set when the Elf had attacked him in the forest, and fled into the trees. Toghrul seldom was swayed on such matters when he set his mind to a particular course, but Rhyden’s words kept coming back to him, troubling him.

I cannot lead Temuchin to his death. He is a good boy. His heart is decent and kind. I know it is. I can sense it.

These had not been the words of a coward, but rather of someone with honor and decency in their heart. The Elf did not know Temuchin well enough to care for him, and yet, Toghrul realized that he had not run to save himself. *He thought it would keep us from going into the mountains—and Temu from danger.*

Toghrul wanted to ask Rhyden if he had seen some sort of grim premonition. The Elf would not have to bother running again to keep Temuchin safe; Toghrul would carry the boy in his arms back to the Nuqut, and over Aigiarn’s most vehement protests, if need be. He might not have proffered the seed, but Temu was his son in every way but blood, and Toghrul would be damned if any prophesized destiny would see harm come to him.

He wanted to ask, drew breath to speak more than once, but each time he held his words, bit his tongue. *Yeb would have seen it*, he told himself. *He is a yeke shaman—the only greater we have ever known was his own father, Inalchuk. If there were divine secrets—if Temu was in danger—the Tengri would have revealed it to Yeb, not the Elf.*

Toghrul did not know what he felt for the Elf now, but it was not trust, that was for certain—not after Rhyden had nearly plowed the senses from his skull with his own composite bow and knocked him sideways out of the heights of a pine tree. The Elf had tricked him in the forest, and he could yet be tricking him now, using Temuchin as some sort of device to deceive Toghrul.

I will ask Yeb, he thought, as he glanced again toward the Elf. The seepage of blood from the wound above his ear had seemed to stave, and Toghrul again wondered what sort of hiimori or magic allowed someone to heal with such astonishing speed. Yeb will know, not the Elf. I will ask Yeb if Temuchin will know any harm, because if he will, destiny or no destiny—Negh or not—we are not going into those mountains. We are going back to the Nuqut and the aysil—back to our home.

Chapter Three

“Are you frightened, Wen?” Pryce asked. A lantern hung from an iron hook on the mast behind Wen, casting soft, golden light on Pryce’s face, draping his features in shadows.

They had been at sea for nearly two hours. The longboat had cleared Lunan Bay and now followed the winds and current of the Ionium stream north along the shoreline of Torach. Aelwen, Odhran, Pryce and several other members of the sixteen-person crew lay huddled together in close proximity for warmth in the narrow margin of open space surrounding the mast, beneath the large sheet of the unfurled sail.

Odhran had fallen almost immediately asleep, his forehead pressed comfortably between her shoulders, his breath rattling quietly from his chest in faint snores. The open deck of the longboat offered little protection from the brisk wind, and Wen had kept expecting him to complain about the bitter cold. She loved Odhran dearly, but carping was as much a part of him as brawn, and she had been flabbergasted that so far, he had not offered a peep of protest, none of the whining and grouching that was customary for him. He had even exchanged some cordial words with Pryce before they had turned in. Wen had nearly toppled over the port side of the boat in her incredulity.

What in the duchar has gotten into him? she had wondered.

While the others dozed, she and Pryce remained awake awhile beneath their blankets, facing one another and talking quietly as they lay along the port bulwark.

She shook her head, shrugging beneath her blankets. “No, I am not frightened,” she said. “Not really. Nervous, maybe. Uncertain.”

“Me, too,” Pryce admitted. “I have never even heard of these people, the Oirat before. From what Aedhir says, they do not sound like a good sort.” His brows drew slightly, his face growing troubled. “I hope they do not hurt Lord Fabhcun.”

“Captain Fainne will find them,” Wen said. “Wherever they have gone, wherever they have brought Lord Fabhcun, the Captain will find them, and if they have hurt him, he will make them answer for it.”

Pryce smiled at her. “You harbor a lot of faith in Captain Fainne, do you not?”

“Yes, I do,” she said. “Do you not, Pryce?”

H nodded. “Of course.”

She watched a sort of admiration soften his face as he said this, a veneration that stoked within his eyes. *Because he is your father*, she thought. She knew how Pryce felt. *Because he is mine, too*.

Wen felt secretly and selfishly grateful that it had only Rhyden Fabhcun that Hodder had bartered to the venalium, only Rhyden that they sailed to rescue and not her father along with him. She was ashamed of herself for this, but felt it nonetheless. She rolled slightly, lifting her chin and peering toward the stern of the boat. Aedhir stood there at the helm, with the man-at-arms, Thierley Feldwick manning the rudder and tacking their course along shore. Aedhir kept his arms folded across the chest of his great coat, the brim of his thick wool tricorne hat pulled low. His expression was set in a grim, determined scowl. He was worried for Rhyden, and wracked with guilt and despair, thinking somehow what had happened was his fault. She wanted so badly to go to him, to hold him and comfort him in his pain and sorrow.

Oh, Father, she thought. *It is not your fault. You have not brought this upon Rhyden or any of us*.

“She is rather lovely, is she not?” Pryce asked, drawing Wen’s gaze.

“What?” She blinked at him, bewildered. “Who?”

The corner of Pryce’s mouth lifted wryly. “Tacita Metella.” She realized he thought she had been peeking at the strange, slender blond woman Aedhir had brought back from the Capuan catasta. Tacita sat on a small bench just afore the helm rudder, close to Aedhir. She had offered little by means of discourse or disclosure as Wen had accompanied her to her stateroom aboard the *a’Maorga*, loaning her some clothes to wear, but what she had said had left Wen disconcerted and decidedly uncomfortable in her company.

“You are Lord Fainne’s son?” Tacita had asked, startling Wen as she had stood with her back to the woman, listening to the rustling sounds of fabric as Tacita dressed in the shirt and breeches Wen had offered her.

“No, ma’am,” Wen had said, staring at the wall of her stateroom. She had not felt comfortable leaving Tacita alone in the room she and Odhran shared, but the woman

had not seemed offended or troubled by her presence. “We are both of Median descent. It is not so uncommon in Tiralainn. Medi is—”

“I am familiar with Medi,” Tacita had interjected mildly. “I was raised in Euboea, in southern Achaia, along the Median border. It is in your face, as well as your skin. You have eyes like Lord Fainne’s. And your mouth is shaped the same.”

“I...I am not related to Captain Fainne, ma’am,” Wen had said, flustered and unnerved that the woman would so readily make an observation that had seemingly escaped the notice of the men aboard the *a’Maorga* for several weeks.

Tacita had remained relatively silent since leaving the frigate, as well, seeming content to gaze out across the water with her gloved hands folded against the lap of Rhyden Fabhcun’s great coat. She had spoken occasionally to Aedhir in quiet murmurs Wen had not been able to overhear, and, like Aedhir, Tacita did not seem to feel the need or urge to lay her head down and sleep as the other crewmen did.

“I said, she is lovely,” Pryce said. “Not my type, of course,” he added with a wink and another smile. “I abandoned blonds after Mena.” He nodded his chin slightly in encouragement. “You should talk to her.”

Mother Above, he thinks I fancy Tacita Metella, Wen thought, and she pressed her lips together again, this time to hold back a snort of laughter. She forgot sometimes that Pryce did not realize she was not a boy. She felt so comfortable around him, speaking with him, she made no effort or affects, and was frankly surprised that she had not made some verbal blunder to reveal herself during the course of one of their conversations. “I am not going to talk to her.”

He raised his brows. “Why not?”

“Because she is a slave,” she said in a whisper, lest Aedhir or Tacita hear.

Pryce reached out from beneath his blankets and slapped her lightly in the shoulder. “So?”

She slapped him back. “You are a rot job,” she said, laughing quietly.

“And you, Wen Poel, are a bloody coward when the matter comes to women,” Pryce told her, grinning. “You are going to be laid this voyage—whether you like it or not. I will see to that.”

If it means with you, I would not mind for it, she thought, feeling her cheeks blaze with bright color. “You are bloody daft,” she said, laughing again.

Pryce raised his head a bit, propping his elbow beneath him and looking toward the stern. “You really do not think she is pretty?” He glanced at Wen. He lay his head down again, his face close to hers. “You must be the one who is bloody daft, not me. Maybe your bride-to-be was not so plain after all.”

“Whether she was pretty or not is hardly the point,” Wen said. “I did not want to marry her. Why should I have to? I am not some damn bauble my mother can sell off to the highest bidder and I am not bound by her worthless dreams and lofty ambitions. I have plenty of my own—and not a one of them involves an extravagant noble wedding, a boring noble married life and a brood of spoiled, coddled noble children. My mother may not give a damn about what I want for myself—but I do, and I will not sacrifice my life to fulfill some pathetic lack she feels in her own.”

Her voice had grown sharp; Wen still fumed every time she thought too long about Iona, and about Iona’s grand and illustrious plans to see her wed to Lord Malvo Hunwick, a man Wen considered a bloated, boorish buffoon. She doubted that Hunwick would be able to describe her face aloud if asked, even though he had known Wen for ten years. Every time they had ever seen one another, usually at Iona’s meddling arrangement, Hunwick’s gaze had not seemed to crawl any higher on her form than her breasts. The idea of marrying him—worse, laying with him—was repugnant enough to turn Wen’s stomach.

Pryce’s his blue eyes widened somewhat. “I was only joking, Wen. I am sorry. I did not mean—”

Her face softened in abashed realization. “Hoah, Pryce, no, I...I should not have...” She sighed, lowering her gaze, looking at the hem of blanket draped across his shoulder. “My mother is a sore topic for me, and I am sorry. Even thinking of her frustrates me.”

“Because of the marriage she wanted to arrange?”

Wen shrugged. “That, and other things,” she said. “My whole life, really. My mother grew up very poor. I think she is trying to give me the sort of noble childhood she never had.” She glanced at Pryce. “I did not want to get married.”

“Yes, I gathered that,” Pryce said with a smile.

“I did not want to marry because I wanted more than that, more for myself. I thought I loved someone else.”

“Only thought?”

The corner of Wen’s mouth hooked with more sadness than humor. “Yes. Like you with Mena, my senses were brought right ’round to me again on that through no effort on my part. Purpose served, though, right?”

“Who was she?” Pryce asked quietly.

“Someone my mother did not approve of,” Wen said. “I went to classes at the university in Belgaeran without my parents’ knowledge, and...” She struggled not to slip in her words. “She was one of my instructors, an Abhacan visiting from one of the conservatories in Iarnrod.”

“You mean a Dwarf?” Pryce’s brows raised in surprise.

“No, I mean an Abhacan,” Wen replied, her eyes flashing defensively. “What is wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Pryce said. “Nothing at all.”

He was being curious, not judgmental, and Wen’s stern expression softened. “I am sorry, Pryce. I did not mean to...”

“It is alright,” he said, drawing her gaze. “We do not have to talk about it, if you would rather not.”

“No,” she shook her head. “No, I do not mind. You have told me so much about yourself...your life these past days, and it is only fair.”

He laughed. “It is not a contest, Wen,” he said. “I like talking to you.”

“And I like talking to you, Pryce,” she admitted softly, making him smile. “I want to talk about it.”

Nichas Aleighan was fifteen years older than Wen, though one might never have known it to look at him. He had a youthful, handsome face and a relaxed, comfortable demeanor that had naturally endeared him in the regard of his students. He was a guest instructor at the Belgaeran university, offering lectures on Abhacan epic poetry and literature. Wen, who wanted to enroll in the poet laureate program one day, had eagerly

seized upon the chance to take one of his classes, and nearly from the first moment he had stepped into the room, she had been enchanted with him.

He did not dress like one of the other stuffy instructors. Nichas never wore a justicoat or cravat, preferring to keep his sleeve cuffs unfettered and turned back towards his elbows, the collars of his shirts open beneath the tops of his waistcoats. He never wore powdered wigs or cosmetics, keeping his russet hair tied back from his face in a hastily gathered tail. He spoke with great passion on the matter of poetry, and was fond of leaning his hip against the corner of his podium, or squatting, resting his elbows on his knees while addressing his students. He liked to gesture broadly with his hands, his voice imparting such enthusiasm, such wonder as he recited epic stanzas from memory, or explained subtle nuances or connotations within, that it was difficult—if not impossible—not to share in his zeal.

*“And as we stand upon that shrouded threshold
of waning twilight cast in faded shadows,
considering all that has come to pass
in that brief and poignant measure
of breath and blood beyond the dawn,
do we lay down our scythes,
our broken tools of labor and toil,
embracing freely the quiet darkness,
or turn our backs and raise our fists,
our voices shrill with futile protest?”*

Nichas had knelt before Aelwen during his first lecture and recited this passage, his gaze locked with hers, his impassioned cadence stilling her very breath. The room was crowded, filled with students crammed nearly shoulder-to-shoulder in every available seat, and yet it had been as if he had spoken only to her, declaiming the lines only for her benefit. It had felt like he had reached into her mind, her heart and caressed her gently, tenderly with only his voice, his words. When he had stood, averting his gaze to address the class, Wen had been left lightheaded and breathless.

She was not alone in her adoration of Nichas. He would often invite his students to pubs near the university, and they would turn out in droves to listen to him, speak

with him over pints of portar long into the night. Wen always attended, frequently dragging Odhran with her, and he, too, had enjoyed engaging Nichas in lengthy, eager discussions of Abhacan history and culture.

Her friendship with Nichas had blossomed swiftly and deeply over several months, and one night after one of their regular pub discussions, he had invited her to his flat. She had accompanied him, and had been delighted as he showed her some of the more priceless and irreplaceable volumes of poetry he had brought with him on loan from Iarnrod's archives. The books were ancient, transcribed on parchment pages as brittle and fragile as a thin film of fresh ice, bound together with stitching made from strands of animal sinew. She had been fascinated to see them, and her wonder had pleased him. When he had kissed her, she had not minded. He had made love to her on the floor of his parlor, hours spent in tender, deliberate attention, his hand, mouth and hips moving her to heretofore unprecedented pleasure.

They had been lovers for almost a month before Iona had learned of it. Wen should have known better than to hope to keep any secrets from her mother and her circle of incessant, gossiping friends. How she had managed to hide the fact she had been taken classes at the university for nearly a year in full up until that moment had astonished her.

"He is using you." Iona had paced before her in the parlor of their home, the long hems of her skirt and underlying crinolines whispering against the polished wood floor. She had been furious; Wen had never seen her mother so filled with rage. Iona nearly trembled with it, her pale hands closed in tight fists, her brows crimped, her thin lips drawn in a frown.

"He is not, Mother," Wen had said, sitting on a fainting couch, following her mother's brisk strides with her gaze. Odhran had said much the same to her, his face filled with sorrow and concern, but Wen had not listened to him, either. "Nichas loves me. He told me so, and I love him."

Iona had whirled, her eyes blazing. "Of course he told you that!" she cried. "You are a naive and stupid child, Aelwen, and he would tell you anything to get your underpinnings off—to get between your thighs!"

“I am neither naive nor stupid, Mother,” Wen had said, incensed and bristling. “And I am hardly a child—”

“You must be stupid,” Iona snapped. “You must be to think that I would not find out about this, that your father and I would never learn of it!”

Vaughan is not my father, Wen wanted to retort, but she forced herself to hold her tongue. She knew her stepfather was in the adjacent library, likely privy to the entire exchange, and she did not want to hurt him.

“I told you I did not want you at that school,” Iona said, jabbing her spindly forefinger, one manicured nail at her daughter. “I expressly forbade it, Aelwen, and you deliberately and blatantly defied me. And now I find out you are laying in rut with some Dwarf from Iarnrod who—”

“Do not call him that,” Wen said, closing her own hands into fists. “He is an *Abhacan*, and his race or height does not matter to me. I love him.”

“Well, it is over with him,” Iona said. “Over with him and with this bloody damn nonsense of school. You are not seeing him again, and you are not going back to that university.”

“Yes, I am.”

“Do not defy me,” Iona said, striding towards her, quaking with rage. “Do not dare, Aelwen. If you do not think I can keep you from it—and from him—you are sorely mistaken, because I can, and I fully well mean to see it done. What in the Bith do you need university tutelage for? I have arranged a marriage for you with one of the finest families in the whole of Belgaeran—there is all you should need to have in your mind. A woman of noble birth does not need education when she has a good name and proper title. Why would you see all of that ruined for me?”

“It is not about you!” Wen had cried, tears springing to her eyes. “You do not even care about me, or what I want! I do not want to marry Malvo Hunwick!”

“You are marrying him whether you wish it or not,” Iona had told her, standing before her, planting her hands against the slim measure of her waist. “You are marrying him straight away after this latest foolishness—two weeks, Aelwen. I have spoken with Lady Hunwick and we have made the necessary arrangements. It took great effort on my part—nearly every measure of charm I possess—to convince her rumors of you and

this Dwarf were just cruel lies invented by jealous classmates. Somehow I managed to persuade her that you were still worthy of her son, and we have agreed on a date. Two weeks, at Ardeaglais' Coroin cathedral."

Wen had blinked at her, stunned. "What?" Tears burned in her eyes. "No, you...you cannot do that. You cannot..."

"I am your mother," Iona replied sharply. "I most certainly can."

"I will not marry him," Wen whispered, shaking her head in shocked denial. "...I will not."

"Oh, yes, you will," Iona said, and she leaned down, grasping Wen by the shoulders, giving her a rough shake. "What is the matter with you? What—you think you will marry this Dwarf lover you have found for yourself? Have shame, Aelwen. He does not have a noble title even among his own people! He is a common plebeian. How could you do this? After all I have done to build a good life for us—to see you know nothing but happiness, to want for naught. How could you do this to me?"

"It is not about you!" Wen cried again, shoving Iona aside as she sprang to her feet. She snatched her skirts in her hands and fled from the parlor, weeping as she ran for her room. "It is not about you at all!"

She had managed to sneak out of the house, clambering down from the balcony outside of her chamber. She had hired a hansom to see her to Nichas' flat, crying inconsolably the entire way. She had been dismayed to find Nichas in the process of packing up all of his books and belongings upon her arrival. He had opened his door and blinked at her, his expression surprised and sorrowful.

"Wen..." he whispered.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her voice hoarse and tremulous with tears. She could see traveling trunks in the parlor beyond his shoulder, with lids opened, books and papers stacked about on the floor as he loaded all inside the cases. "Where...where are you going?"

"Wen, I have been called back to Iarnrod," he told her. He did not move out of the doorway, making no effort to invite her inside. "They have an appointment available with the royal conservatory there, one I have wanted for some time, and they have offered it to me."

“That is not true,” she whimpered, staring at him, stricken. “No, that is not true.”

“Wen, I am sorry,” he said, reaching for her, hooking his fingers against her palm. “I was going to send word to you. I am expected to begin next week, and I have to leave tonight.”

“What did she do?” Wen asked. “What did Iona say to you? Why are you doing this?”

He did not answer her. He looked down at his shoes, his brows lifted in sorrow.

“I love you, Nichas. And you love me, too. I know you do. Whatever she said—whatever my mother told you, I know you love me. Please do not let her do this.”

“Wen, you do not understand,” he said.

She recoiled from him, jerking her hand away. “No, I do not.”

He looked up at her. “You are young yet, Wen, and innocent. I found that beautiful about you and being with you was...extraordinary. But that is all. I wanted to lay with you, not love you.”

She blinked at him, feeling her heart cleave. “What?”

“What did you think would come of it, Wen?” he asked. “Did you honestly expect more than this? I do not love you, Aelwen. I never have.”

“You cannot mean that, Nichas,” she gasped. “Please, you do not mean that.”

Nichas stepped back from the threshold. “I am sorry, Wen,” he said as he closed the door on her. “But I do.”

Wen told all of this to Pryce, managing to remember to change her references to Nichas, referring to him as a woman, a lover Wenham Poel had taken at school. Pryce had listened quietly, his face soft and filled with gentle sympathy, and when she fell silent, he slipped his hand from beneath his blankets, curling his gloved fingers briefly, kindly against hers.

“I am sorry, Wen.”

She nodded, mute with sorrow at the memory, unable to meet his gaze.

“I know how that hurts,” he said. “I think I must have always known that Mena. She wanted a lover, not me. But you hope...because you love them, and you want so badly for them to love you, too.”

She did not know if Nichas had loved her or not. The pain was still too fresh and new to her heart, the confusion too profound, but as Pryce spoke, Wen wondered if maybe she had been wrong all along, mistaking passion for love. Maybe Nichas had no more loved her than Mena Sydall had Pryce; maybe Nichas and Mena were simply a pair fashioned of the same design, too selfish and self-indulgent to appreciate love when it was offered to them freely, innocently. She remembered Mena speaking derisively about Pryce at that long-ago summer party:

This silly little lamb fancies himself in love! Truly, why must men confuse their loins with their hearts? He is a lovely distraction, I tell you, and a splendid lover besides, but...what would he expect of me?

and found eerie echoes of the young woman's cold dismissal in the words of her own lover.

Wen's heart suddenly ached in pained realization. *Maybe men are not the only ones mistaking their loins for the hearts.*

"What about your father?" Pryce asked, drawing her gaze. "He did nothing about this? He would not help you?"

"Vaughan Poel is not my real father," Wen said. "My father died when I was very young, and I never really knew him. Vaughan raised me as his own. I mean, he was very good to me, and I love him very much, but he was not the sort I could talk to, turn to for help."

Vaughan Ultan, her stepfather, was a good man, who loved her dearly, but he had always deferred to Iona's wishes and demands on Wen's life, and never questioned Iona's expectations or edicts. Vaughan had come to her on the night she and Iona had quarreled, after Wen had returned from Nichas' flat and had crumpled across her bed, facedown and distraught, weeping into her pillows. Vaughan had sat against the edge of her mattress, placing his hand against her shoulder as she shuddered with the force of her sobs.

"Please do not weep, Wen," he said softly.

"I will not marry Malvo Hunwick." Wen rolled onto her side, staring at him desperately, pleading with her eyes. "Please, Vaughan. Please do not let this happen. It is not fair, and I cannot bear it. Please, I want to go to school. I want to be with Nichas."

“Wen...” he said, his brows lifting.

“I love him, Vaughan,” she said. “And he loves me, too. I know he does. Mother...she...she has done something, paid him to leave, and he is leaving, Vaughan! He is leaving me. Please do not let this happen.”

“How do you know he is leaving?” Vaughan asked, and she blinked at him, abashed. He sighed heavily and shook his head. “Aelwen, if your mother finds you sneaking out the window, she will—”

“Please do not tell her,” Wen pleaded, sitting up, clutching at Vaughan’s sleeve. “Please, Vaughan. I had to see him. I...” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “How could she do this? How could she hurt me this way?”

“She wants to help you, not hurt you, Aelwen,” he told her, cupping his palm against her face. “Your mother loves you. She only wants what is best for you, and she has worked very hard to see these arrangements in place for you, to see you wed into a distinguished family. She has not done this to be cruel, no matter how it may seem to you right now.”

“You are on her side?” she gasped, dismayed. “No, no—Vaughan, please. Please, you cannot mean to agree with her!”

“I do agree with her, Wen,” he said. “Because I want what is best for you, too.” He had tried to brush the cuff of his knuckles against her cheek, and when she recoiled from him, angry and confused, she had seen the hurt in his eyes.

“He was good to me,” she said again to Pryce. “But he was not the sort I could talk to. He agreed with Mother, on the matter of my marriage...the university...everything.”

She glanced at Pryce and found him regarding her, his expression kind. *As though I would ever find more room for him than in my bed*, Mena had remarked of him, her lovely little nose wrinkling as though a foul odor offended her. *His salary is a pittance, his name as worthless as a stone.*

Mena Sydall is a damn bloody fool, Wen thought as Pryce smiled at her gently and something within her softened.

“Was that what made you come to the Navy?” he asked. “How did you convince your mother and stepfather to let you join?”

“I did not...precisely,” Wen said. “They would not have let me go. They would have found a way to stop me. I know it.”

“You did not tell them at all?”

Wen shook her head, and Pryce raised his brows. “Hoah, Wen...”

“I am twenty-three,” she said. “I do not need their permission.”

“You were truly that angry with them?”

The bartered marriage with Malvo Hunwick had not been the breaking point for Wen’s heart. Even that painful realization of Nichas’ betrayal, and her suspicions of her mother’s part in his abrupt departure had not been enough, not in the end. The final, agonizing moment had come the day after Nichas had left for Iarnrod, when Iona and Vaughan had left the house, joining some of their aristocratic friends in the royal city for lunch. Wen had still been filled with indignant rage; she had stormed into her mother’s room and torn the chamber apart, searching wildly, furiously for any evidence of Iona paying Nichas to leave. Iona kept meticulous notes and journals, and Wen had felt certain that one of her journals would reveal the truth of her culpability. She had been determined to find this proof. She had thrown open the doors to Iona’s wardrobe and turned it asunder, throwing skirts and gowns across the floor in her efforts.

Her groping hands had fumbled against the edge of a wooden box tucked in the back of the wardrobe, and Wen had sat on the floor, cradling it in her lap. She had not known what she would find as she turned back the lid of the box, but its contents had been beyond any measure of her fathoming. She had stared down, startled and bewildered to discover hundreds upon hundreds of sealed, unopened letters inside the box, all bundled together neatly with lengths of slender ribbons. The correspondences on the tops of each of the these bundles bore her name—*Lady Aelwen Fainne*—along with her mailing address, and her breath had stilled beneath her bosom.

Lady Aelwen Fainne.

She had not been called that name since childhood—*Fainne*. When Vaughan and Iona had married, Iona had changed Aelwen’s last name to reflect that of Vaughan’s noble family, Ultan, and while very few even knew that her birth father was Aedhir Fainne, even fewer still would have ever called her by this surname.

She had slipped the top letter from one of the piles, her fingertips trembling as she held it toward her face. She turned it over; it bore a bright blue wax seal imprinted with the crest of the Crown Navy. She had frowned. Her father, Aedhir had served in the Crown Navy, but Iona had always told her that Aedhir was dead. He had drowned at sea, his body lost beneath the waves when Wen had been only a young girl.

What is this? she had thought, perplexed and somewhat nervous. She flipped through the letters in the box, the confusion and anxiety in her heart only mounting as she realized they were all addressed to her, each and every one of them.

She opened the letter in her hand, sliding her thumb beneath the flap of folded parchment and listening to the wax seal break softly. She unfolded the page and frowned again to see the date written at the top right corner of the page in a small, gracefully sloping script: *August 29, 1743, third age*. The letter had been written seven years ago, delivered apparently when she had been a young girl of only sixteen.

Hullo, Aelwen, it opened in greeting. We arrived this morrow at dawn in Serdica after six weeks at sea. What an exquisite sight to watch the sun come up over this sprawling and splendid landscape. It is perhaps the most beautiful city I have ever seen. The buildings are all fashioned of blanched marble and pale granite, and when the sun's light spills upon them, they are nearly aglow. You can marvel over them from the water, and as you come upon the harbor, it is enough to steal your breath.

"Who is this from?" Wen whispered. She did not know anyone in the Crown Navy, none who would have written to her, especially at sixteen. She looked down toward the bottom of the page and her heart shuddered to a wrenching, anguished halt. She had gasped, nearly dropping the paper, her voice escaping her throat in a soft, breathless tangle.

I miss you. Every moment of every day, and with every breath I draw, Aelwen, I am thinking of you. I love you. — Father

"Oh..." Wen said quietly. She had let the parchment flutter from her hand to the floor as she sat, motionless in her absolute shock. She had taken another note from one of the bundles, opening it hurriedly, her hands shaking as she turned back the flaps of the page, her eyes darting from the date at the top to the signature at the bottom.

April 17, 1739, third age... You are ever in my heart, Aelwen, and I will see you soon, my love. — Father

Wen opened the next, and the next, ripping open the seals on dozens of letters, tears spilling from her eyes as she gasped over and over again in stunned, anguished dismay.

June 3, 1747... I have always and will ever love you, lass. — Father

February 23, 1734... Be a good lass for your Momma, and know that you are in my heart. — Father

October 28, 1748... I miss you, Aelwen. I cannot express in words how much I have missed you these years. I am hoping to see you this next visit to Belgaeran, in mid-September. I will send word to your Mother. All of my heart — Father

“No,” Wen whispered, her vision blurred with tears. Her hand darted to her mouth. “No, no...oh, no...please...”

November 19, 1736... Happy birthday, Aelwen. I love you always — Father

“It...it is not possible...” she had whispered in agonized realization. She had been told Aedhir Fainne—her father—had died in the year 1733, but here were letters from him, countless correspondences, sent throughout the seventeen years since. She had thought she had known the full extent of Iona’s self-serving treachery with Nichas, but at that moment, Wen had realized this had only been the edge of her mother’s capabilities. She held cruelty in her hands, nothing but years’ worth of heartless malice perpetrated against Wen and her father.

“It is not possible,” she had said, clutching the letters against her heart, weeping.

It had taken Wen less than a day to decide what to do. She was fortunate that Iona trusted Odhran, and let him come to visit her, as Iona had fairly well imprisoned her in the house. She had managed to convince Odhran to help her, pleading with him despite his protests. Wen had found the most recent letter from Aedhir among the bundles, this one dated only three weeks earlier:

I am expecting to arrive at Cuan’darach port some time during the Samhradh week. I would dearly love to see you, Aelwen. I know that I have no right to ask it of you, or expect it, but I hope that you would let me, even for just a moment. I love you so

much. I have no right to expect you to believe this, but by my breath, lass—all that I have—it is the truth. I love you — Father

She had persuaded Odhran to enlist with her in the Crown Navy, with Wen in disguise as a young noble son. Odhran had not been readily convinced, but she had assured him they would be gone no longer than the autumn interim from the university. She had learned the name of Aedhir's ship from his letters—the *a'Maorga*—and she had learned that after a brief hiatus in Tiralainn, the frigate was due to sail once more for a six-week, round-trip voyage to and from the city of Cneas on the Morthir.

Odhran had at last relented; she had known he would not refuse her, no matter his efforts to protest, and she had been nearly ashamed of herself for practically bullying him into it. He conceded because he loved her, and she was ashamed of herself for using this against him, too. They had enlisted together, and Wen had taken all of the marks she had saved over the last years to pay for her schooling—more than ten thousand—and bribed the midshipmen's registrar into assigning them both to the *a'Maorga* and Captain Aedhir Fainne's command.

She had left without so much as a note of farewell to Iona or Vaughan. She had taken all of Aedhir's letters from the wooden box, bringing them with her in her knapsack, and had placed the empty box squarely in the middle of the bed Iona and Vaughan shared. Wen had thought that would be message aplenty to them both.

"I was that angry with them, yes," Wen said to Pryce. "I guess I still am."

"They are probably worried for you—especially your mother," he said, and she nodded. *Worried* was likely not the best word to describe it; Iona was undoubtedly frantic and inconsolable by now. Knowing this should have at least offered Wen a little smug sense of triumph, but it did not. It made her feel somewhat sorrowful and ashamed.

"Maybe she did truly think she was doing what was best for you," Pryce said. "Not what is right, maybe, but the best that she knew."

Wen looked at him and he smiled softly. "My mother was never quite in her right mind after my father died," he said. "I do not think she ever stopped mourning for him. After the war, Aedhir helped take care of us. He bought a house for my mother, and sent her money. She never wanted to leave the house. I think she was so used to living

in the Fiainas caves that she did not feel safe outside in the open air. She used to keep all of the draperies closed, all of the time. She bought the heaviest kind she could find and stitched them together along the mid-seam, so no light could come through. It was always dark in the house. I think that is why I like the sea so well. I could never tire of the wind and sun in my face.”

He looked at Wen, his face forlorn. “She killed herself,” he said, drawing Wen’s breath to a halt. “She cut her wrists and I found her like that, blood everywhere. She was so sad...all of the time, and I think she thought what she did was best for me. I have never understood that, but I have come to terms with it, I think.”

“Oh, Pryce,” Wen whispered, feeling sudden tears sting her eyes. “Pryce, I...I am sorry.”

“I have never told anyone that before.” He looked down at his pallet of blankets. “Aedhir knows of course, but no one else.” He glanced up at her and managed a smile. He closed his hand into a light fist and poked his knuckles against her chin. “Except you now. I am only telling you so you know—my mother wanted something better for me than she had known, or could ever offer. She believed Aedhir could give this to me. Maybe that is how your mother feels, too. Maybe she believes this noble daughter can give you the sort of life she hopes you will have—the sort she wants you to have, because she wants you to be happy. That is all.”

“There were other things, too,” Wen said, blinking against tears. She wanted so desperately to confide in Pryce about the letters, because she thought he would understand her pain and confusion. She had told Odhran about them, of course, and he had sympathized with her, but he had been unable to comprehend the sheer and immense weight of such discovery, such despair. She wanted to tell Pryce, but could not. He knew too much about Aelwen Fainne, and he knew of the letter Aedhir had received from her at Cuan’darach. He would have figured out immediately who she was had she told him. “She did cruel things, horrible...and I...I cannot...”

“Maybe she thought she had good reasons for these, too.”

She looked at him, and his face softened as he realized her tears. “Hoah, Wen,” he said, looking disconcerted that she hovered on the verge of weeping.

She struggled to control herself. *Men do not cry*, she told herself, pressing her lips together in a thin line. *He thinks it is odd, Wen—stop before you ruin everything.*

“It will be alright,” Pryce told her, and she nodded mutely, her brows furrowed. “Hey, I promise you. It will be alright.”

She nodded again. He shrugged his shoulder, settling himself comfortably beneath his blankets. “It will be dawn soon,” he said. “We had best find some sleep, or the both of us will be worthless.”

She drew her own blankets further along her shoulder, rubbing her fingertips against her nose and sniffing, trying to pretend the cold wind made her nose run and not tears. When she glanced at Pryce, she found him smiling at her.

“What?” she asked, pretending to frown, sniffing again.

“So what was it like?”

“What was what like?”

He arched his brow. “Making love to an Abhacan.”

Wen laughed despite herself. “Very nice,” she said. “The best I have ever known, in fact.”

“Really now?” Pryce said, looking thoughtful. He rolled over to face the bulwark, presenting his back to her. “I shall have to bear that in mind.”

He rolled slightly, glancing over his shoulder to offer her a grin, and she laughed again. “You are a job.”

He reached around behind him, hooking his arm beneath her chin. He canted his wrist and offered her hair a fond tousling before he rolled over again, away from her. “Good night, Wen.”

She smiled at him, brushing her fingertips against his shoulders, a tender gesture he did not realize or feel through the thick woolen layers of his blankets and coat. “Good night, Pryce,” she said softly.

Chapter Four

Wen lay quietly for an hour or so, nestled between Odhran and Pryce along the port side of the longboat, but no matter how hard she tried, her mind would not grow quiet enough to sleep. She listened to the soft sounds of Odhran snoring from behind in quiet harmony with Pryce's deep, measured breaths as he slept in front of her. She could feel the chill of the frigid air even through her layers of blankets and clothing, and she could not seem to settle comfortably enough to rest. At last, she gave up altogether and crawled out from beneath her blankets.

She tried to move slowly, but she stirred Odhran nonetheless. He groaned quietly and moved his hand, brushing his fingertips clumsily, groggily against his face. "Where are you going?" he asked, his voice hoarse.

"I cannot sleep," she whispered, kneeling on her pallet and looking down at him.

He sat up, forking his fingers through his short-cropped hair and blinking dazedly. "Are you alright?"

She smiled at him. "I am fine," she said. "I just cannot rest, that is all. I thought I might go talk to the Captain awhile."

"Hoah," he said, nodding. He scratched at his scalp and shoved his blankets aside. "I will go with you, then."

"Go back to sleep, Odhran," she told him, tousling his hair with her fingertips. "You are exhausted."

"I am not," he replied, swatting her hand away with a smile. He stretched a bit, drawing his arms over his head to lengthen his spine. She could hear the soft groaning of his neck bones popping obligingly into proper alignment. "Hoah, I will not find much bloody good sleep here, that is for certain, with these damn rotted boards shoved against my back. It is like sleeping on a rock."

Wen smiled again. Here was the grouching Odhran she knew best and fondly. His previous lack of complaint had nearly worried her.

"Do you suppose they have any hot tea or biscuits that are not stale or brittle?" he asked.

She laughed, her hand darting to her mouth to stifle the sound as Pryce groaned from beside her, moving slightly beneath his blankets without rousing. "I doubt it, Odhran."

He sighed heavily, his shoulders hunching. "That bloody figures," he muttered.

They made their way toward the stern of the boat, stepping carefully around the still, snoring forms of crewmen draped in covers and huddled together for warmth. Aedhir watched them approach; he had been sitting on a small, narrow bench before a traveling trunk he was using as a sort of makeshift desk upon which to spread his maps and charts. He had been reviewing and comparing several while speaking quietly with Thierley Feldwick at the helm. Tacita Metella had curled onto her side on the floor of the stern, facing the bulwark and seeming to sleep. The sun had only just broken along the eastern horizon, spreading warm, rose-tinted light across the sea.

"Good morrow, lads," Aedhir said to Wen and Odhran.

"Good morrow, Captain," Wen said.

"Hullo, sir," Odhran said.

"Odhran, I am glad you are awake," Aedhir said, setting aside a quill and adjusting the position of a small lantern on the trunk to keep his papers and parchments from catching the breeze and fluttering away. He rose to his feet.

Odhran glanced at Wen, his expression quizzical and wary. "You are, sir?"

"I am indeed," Aedhir replied. He reached down and lifted a piece of parchment in his hand, bringing it to the midshipman. "You studied history at the university in Belgaeran, did you not? The laureate program?"

"Yes, sir," Odhran said, even more puzzled now.

"Did you ever learn of Abhacan history?" Aedhir asked. "Their old language, Chegney?"

"Yes, sir," Odhran nodded. "A bit, sir. We had instructors visit from Iarnrod sometimes, and they would offer courses, yes, sir."

"Good, then." Aedhir offered the parchment to Odhran. "Tell me, what can you make of this?"

Odhran took the page between his hands, glancing uncertainly at Wen again. She peered over his shoulder and saw it was some sort of charcoal or ash rubbing, a

transfer of etched rune characters from stone or wood onto parchment. She did not recognize the simple, peculiar letters, and frowned, curious.

“Tacita found that in Rhyden’s coat pocket,” Aedhir told them, tapping his forefinger against the page. “A man gave it to him outside of the harbormaster’s office in Capua. I think this man was one of the Oirat who bought him at the catasta and took him from us.”

Odhran and Wen blinked in surprise.

“Whatever it is, Rhyden was very excited about it,” Aedhir said, his brows furrowed, his mouth set grimly. He turned away from them, his gaze distant and thoughtful as he folded his arms across his chest.

“It is a rubbing of some sort,” Odhran said, looking down at the page. He stepped over to the trunk Aedhir used as a desk and knelt before it, holding the parchment toward the lantern to see it better. Wen stood behind him, looking over his shoulder as he studied the markings. “It looks like it was made off of stone. You can see the grain imprinted on the page.”

“Rhyden told me he thought it came from some sort of Abhacan artifact,” Aedhir said, without turning to face them. “That is the word he used. *Artifact*. He said it was a version of Chegney the Abhacan have not spoken for millennia—the eighth dynasty, he said, with fourth dynastic transitory runes.” He glanced over his shoulder at Odhran, who had looked up at this, his eyes wide and startled. “Does that mean something to you?”

“Yes,” Odhran said, somewhat breathless with amazement. “Yes, sir, it means this writing is very old. Eighth dynasty runes would have been used at least three thousand years ago, maybe even as long ago as five.” When Aedhir looked puzzled, Odhran stood, holding the parchment out demonstratively.

“The Abhacan had fourteen series of rune characters they used in written Chegney,” he said. “They are referred to by dynasty because different branches of the Abhacan royal family have held the throne at different times. Each particular branch that came to power was considered a dynasty, and if a king did not have a male heir to assume the throne from him, the crown was passed to the nearest blood kin of the king who did—a nephew, cousin, brother, and so on. Abhacan kings generally had lots of

children, because they tried very hard to have male heirs. They wanted to keep the throne in their family, or dynasty.”

Odhran looked down at the parchment again, his brows lifted in fascination. “There are only fourteen recorded dynasties, so they seemed to have done fairly well having sons for long periods of time. But there was a lot of rivalry in the royal branches, so when a king had no heir, and someone else got to assume the throne, they would change the alphabet of rune characters to mark the transition.”

He met Aedhir’s gaze. “It is sort of like their way of getting rid of the old dynasty, and making theirs dominant. Transitory ruins are usually ones that were used so often, or were easy to inscribe, the different kings would keep them, especially if they came from a dynasty the new king had been on friendly terms with—sort of a respectful nod to their predecessors.”

“Wait a moment, Odhran,” Aedhir said, holding up his hand. He glanced over his shoulder toward Thierley. “Hoah, Thierley, why do you not stand down awhile, as Mister Poel is with us?” he asked. “Get these men roused, and have Mister Brumford relieved on lookout. I can take the rudder, while Mister Poel heaves the log and counts knots.”

Thierley raised his brow at the Captain, rubbing his thick fingers against the scraggly growth of his day-old beard. He did not say anything; the dubious expression on his face spoke more than words and Aedhir laughed.

“Get hence,” he said, slapping the back of his hand against Thierley’s broad shoulder. “It has been some time, but I think I can still cun a bloody damn rudder.”

“Aye, Captain,” Thierley said, laughing along with him. He and Aedhir traded posts along the starboard corner of the stern, and Thierley began to tromp slowly down the middle of the boat, stepping over benches and knocking the toe of his jackboot in rude rousing against snoozing shoulders and buttocks as he passed.

Aedhir rested his hand against the post of the rudder, lifting his eyes toward the sail momentarily before turning to look over his right shoulder. It had been a relatively simple course they followed so far; due north and along shore, with Torach always within distant but plain view to mark their progress and passage. “Mister Poel, if you would be so kind as to heave the log?” he asked without looking at Wen.

“Of course, sir,” Wen replied. She was a bit offended; obviously Aedhir wanted a moment of private counsel with Odhran. She knew it—and Odhran knew it, too, to judge by the pleased, beaming expression on his face.

Wen frowned as she dropped to her knees, reaching into the small storage compartment tucked at the corner of the stern. Their crates of firearms were stowed in this tight, narrow space, along with wooden boxes stocked with enough swords and utility axes for every man aboard. The logline was also here, and Wen drew out a small sandglass and the rather large, cumbersome log bucket. A spool of rope had been set at the top of the bucket, with hand-turned reels on either side. The end of the rope had a small, triangular piece of wood fettered to it—the “log,” as it was called—while the entire length of the line itself was punctuated by periodic knots.

She stood on the end of the longboat, her thighs pressed against the port bulwark as she leaned over the water, casting the log into the longboat’s wake, watching it skip and dance across the water. The line from the bucket spool began to feed out, and she turned the sandglass over, keeping count in her mind of the knots and listening to Aedhir and Odhran’s quiet conversation resume behind her.

“Can you read that inscription, Odhran?” Aedhir asked.

Odhran frowned a bit, peering closely at the inscription. “I might,” he said. “The eighth dynasty ruled right before the last great migration of the Abhacan from Tirgeimhreadh to Tiralainn. A lot of their history before that, including examples of their alphabet, is lost.”

“Rhyden told me that, yes.”

“There is only one example of pre-ninth dynastic writing that I have ever heard of,” Odhran said. “It is in Iarnrod, at the royal museum.”

“Yes,” Aedhir said, nodding, his expression troubled. “Rhyden told me that, as well.”

“I have never seen it,” Odhran admitted. “Luckily, even though Abhacan kings were vain enough to change the alphabets, they were not terribly creative in their efforts. A lot of times, they made only simple changes to the characters—something people would still recognize, and their scribes could still easily write or carve. I think this

word looks something like *t'eh*, which is one of several Chegney pronouns for *he* or *it*. This series..." Odhran frowned. "I do not know. These must be what Lord Fabhcun recognized as fourth dynastic transitory runes. I have never seen them before. Maybe it is *hed*, or *to go*. That is what it looks like to me." He glanced up at Aedhir. "But I cannot be certain, Captain Fainne. I know more about the history of the language than the language itself. This is ancient writing—the meaning could have completely changed from the time they were written to the present. That happens, too."

"But you think it is real?" Aedhir asked. "You think this is authentic, that it came from some sort of eighth-dynasty Abhacan artifact?"

"It would be hard to prove either way without comparing it to the engravings they have in Iarnrod," Odhran said. "Lord Fabchun was ambassador to Tirurnua for many years, was he not? I imagine he had opportunity to see that example. If he recognized these as fourth dynastic transitories, he knows more about the rune lineage than I do, obviously, and I would be inclined to believe him, sir. If he said they were authentic, I would have to agree with his observation."

Aedhir nodded, his brows furrowing. He cradled his chin in his hand, pressing his forefingers against his mouth, tapping thoughtfully.

"Five knots, Captain Fainne," Wen called out. The sand in the glass had run out and she hoisted the bucket against the top of the bulwark, balancing it against her belly as she reeled the line back in from the sea.

She glanced over her shoulder and saw Aedhir nod once more, flapping his fingers away from his chin briefly, acknowledging her. His eyes were distant again along the Torachan coast, his expression troubled. She glanced at Odhran, curious and concerned, but he shrugged his shoulders slightly, as if to say, *I do not know, Wen*.

"Odhran, why do you not relieve Mister Brumford at the lookout?" Aedhir said, keeping his gaze out upon the shoreline. "You know how to keep watch for shoals?"

"Yes, sir," Odhran said, pleased anew. The lookout was a significant position on the longboat, one usually delegated to seasoned crew members with keen eyes and enough experience to read the water and spy submerged rocks and shallows.

“I would like to go over this with you again later this morning,” Aedhir said, turning to look over his shoulder. “When Tacita and Pryce are awake, so we can all hear it together, if you would not mind.”

“Of course, Captain Fainne,” Odhran said. He offered the parchment back to Aedhir, but Aedhir shook his head.

“Keep it for me,” he said. “Tuck it in your pocket and do not lose it. Of us all, it seems you are the best man to hold onto it.”

“Yes, sir,” Odhran said, aglow now with pride. He folded the page carefully and opened his coat, slipping the parchment into one of the inner pockets.

As Odhran walked toward the bow of the longboat, grinning broadly, Wen knelt at the stern, shoving the bucket and logline back beneath the storage compartment. She tried not to frown; it was the first time since departing Cuan'darach that Aedhir had acknowledged Odhran for an accomplishment, and she knew Odhran was flabbergasted and pleased. He had struggled to perform shipboard tasks that had come almost by nature to Wen, and she knew he had every right and reason to feel proud.

She glanced at Aedhir, rising to her feet and tugging at her great coat to settle it in proper place about her torso. Her father had not turned his eyes from the water; he drummed his fingertips softly against the handle of the rudder, his lips pressed together.

“Are you alright, Captain Fainne?” she asked.

“I think they meant to either way,” Aedhir murmured without looking at her.

“I...I beg your pardon, sir?” Wen asked, puzzled.

Aedhir glanced at her and his stern expression softened. “I am sorry, Wen.” He tapped his fingers against his brow. “Tending my own garden. I said I think they meant to either way.”

Wen took a small step toward him. There had been precious little opportunity for her to speak with her father privately about anything aboard the *a'Maorga*, and she realized he was thinking aloud, wanting to talk. Maybe not to her in particular, but she was near at hand, and Wen was eager for the chance. She approached him, keeping her eyes and attention upon him, even as he turned to look over the starboard side of the boat again.

“The man who gave that parchment to Rhyden...it cannot be a coincidence that he was an Oirat,” Aedhir remarked. “He wore a long yellow vest. Tacita said she saw a man in the same sort of yellow clothing—this man—with the group that bought Rhyden at the catasta. She said he is a shaman, that yellow is a color shamans among the Ulusians wear. She used to travel with a missionary for the empire, and she said they went to Ulus, visited with the Oirat’s northern neighbors, the Khahl enough to be somewhat familiar with them, and their culture.”

He looked at Wen, his brow arched. “I think they meant to take Rhyden. Hodder’s deceit, the catasta—these were just turns of events that played in their favor. They might have even tried at the waterfront had I not intervened. I think that taking Rhyden with them was their intention all along.”

“Why?” Wen asked.

Aedhir nodded toward the bow and Odhran. “I think because of that piece of parchment, and whatever artifact it was taken from,” he said. “I told Rhyden at the time that the Oirat man had overheard us speaking at the harbormaster’s office. Rhyden had identified himself there as an ambassador for the Abhacan. I think that man—that shaman—heard him say this, but instead of trying to dupe Rhyden out of his pences, as I had first thought, I think he meant to take him. Just as I came outside the office, I heard him say he had the artifact the rubbing came from, and asked if Rhyden would like to go to his boat and see it.”

“But why would the Oirat want Rhyden?” she asked.

“I do not know,” Aedhir admitted. “Maybe because they found something...something in the mountains inscribed with Chegney, and they need Rhyden to read it for them.”

He reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a toitin case. He snapped the lid open and took one out, sliding it between his lips. He glanced at Wen, offering the case to her. “Would you like one, lad?”

Wen smiled. “Yes, thank you, sir,” she said. She came to stand next to her father, taking one of his proffered toitins. She cradled her hands against his as he struck flints to light hers first, cherishing the simple act of touching her gloved fingertips against his.

They smoked together, leaning slightly out over the water and tapping their ashes into the boat's wake. She thought he would continue his musings about the Oirat and Rhyden, but instead he glanced at her, his mouth unfolded in a smile. "You and Pryce seem to be getting along well."

Wen nodded. "Yes, sir."

"That is good," Aedhir said, drawing in on his toitin. He canted his head back, exhaling the smoke slowly. "I am glad for it, Wen. I think Pryce must be lonely sometimes, with nothing but old men like me for company. He needs friends his own age."

"You are not old, sir," she said, with a laugh.

He glanced at her and chuckled. "I am not young, either," he replied. "I appreciate you taking time for Pryce. We are fortunate to make friends when we can in life. I did not know Rhyden very well, save for in passing, before we left Tiralainn, but he proved to be a good friend to me." He lowered his gaze, smirking. "In three weeks, he became closer to me than most in my lifetime, in fact. I do not think I have ever known one better."

He sounded forlorn, and Wen's heart ached for him. She placed her hand against his sleeve. "It is not your fault, Captain Fainne."

Aedhir looked at her for a long moment, his face set quizzically, as though something about her piqued his curiosity. He had given her similar looks over the course of the last weeks, and every time he would, Wen's heart would flutter in anxious, excited measure. She had not been fully honest with Odhran about not revealing herself to Aedhir. In truth, Wen was frightened to tell him, uncertain of his reaction, and anxious that he would send her away, back to Iona in Tiralainn. When he looked at her as he did now, it was almost as though he was searching for something within her face, something within her features that struck him as familiar and held his gaze.

She wanted him to recognize her. She wanted him to realize who she was without bearing the responsibility of telling him. *Please know me*, she thought. *Please, Father. If you only ask me, I will tell you. Please, just say my name...ask me.*

"Do I know your father, lad?" he asked.

"I...I do not think so, sir," she said.

Aedhir nodded, looking away from her. He inhaled upon his toitín. “For a time, there were not many Medians in Belgaeran,” he said. “I used to nearly be able to keep track of them.”

“Are you from Belgaeran, sir?” she said. He seemed to be lapsing into his own private musings again, and she did not want to abandon their conversation. She wanted to keep speaking with him, listening to him.

“No,” he said. “I was born in Crieff, along the eastern seaboard, south of the Midland mountains.”

Iona had never shared much with Wen about Aedhir or his family, and she smiled. She had never known where he was from, where he had been born. “Does your family live there still?”

He smiled. “I have a sister, Adaryn Fabell in Leodmeir, the westrealm,” he said. “She and her husband have a livestock farm, several hundred acres. They raise sheep and cattle. My father, Guaire and my other siblings—my brother, Abloec and sister, Aenor—all died in the years of Lahnduren’s reign, before the First War. Damantas marauded our village, and they were murdered.”

She blinked at him, stricken. “I am sorry.”

“It is long-waned history,” he told her, patting her shoulder. She watched as he pinched the scrap of his toitín between his third fingertip and the pad of his thumb, flicking it into the water. “That is how I came to join the Fiainas. They were a rebellious faction, part of the Comhar alliance against Lahnduren, led by a man named Eoghan Drouin. The Fiainas came to Crieff, fought the Damantas and drove them away. They rescued me, brought me and Adaryn to live with them.”

“What of your mother?”

If it bothered Aedhir that she seemed so interested in his family, it did not reflect in his face or voice. In fact, he seemed willing, if not pleased to speak about it; his expression had softened considerably, the tension and severity draining. “She died when I was nine, giving birth to my youngest sister Aenor,” he said. “My father was a fisherman, as were most folks in Crieff. I was the eldest, and I took care of my brother and sisters while he went out on the sea with his nets. When Abloec was old enough to tend to the girls, I started going out with my father, helping on his boat. I learned a great

deal about sailing from him.” He smiled, offering his fingers a little waggle. “Though I can still change a diaper fairly well.”

She laughed softly, and his smile spread into a grin.

“I keep in contact with Adaryn,” he said. “I am not able to see her often. Leodmeir is a far travel from Cuan’darach, but we exchange letters whenever we can. She has four boys—Gethen, Carrick, Shanley and Rourke—ages four, nine, eleven and...seventeen now, I think.” He laughed, shaking his head. “Hoah, Rourke is seventeen this month,” he remarked, sounding wistful. He shrugged. “Her husband, Queran is a good fellow, treats her well, and we all stay fairly close.”

An aunt in Leodmeir, Wen thought. I have an aunt and uncle in Leodmeir, and four cousins besides!

“Pryce told me you have a daughter of your own,” Wen said, her throat constricting anxiously, her voice forcing its way through. “Do you ever see her?”

Aedhir shook his head again, his brows lifting sadly. “No, I have not seen my Wen in a very long time.” He looked at Wen again, that curious, thoughtful look, and her breath drew still.

Please, Father, she thought.

“You must miss her,” she said softly.

Please.

“With all of my heart,” he said, holding her gaze. “Everything that I have.”

Aedhir studied her for a long, thoughtful moment.

He knows, she thought. Surely he knows. He must—how could he not? Please ask me, Father. Please, I do not have the courage to tell you. I do not know how to tell you.

“May I ask you a question, Wen?” he said at length.

Wen froze, her breath tangling in her throat. “Of...of course,” she said, bobbing her head. “Yes, sir.”

“Would you mind to keep an eye on Tacita for this journey?”

Wen blinked at him, so caught off guard by the question, she nearly stumbled. She thought she surely had misheard him. “I...I beg your pardon, sir?”

He smiled. "Tacita spoke with me earlier about you. She told me you were a perfect gentleman to her aboard the *a'Maorga*, that you never once even moved to peep at her or show her any other discourtesy as she dressed. I never believed for a moment that you would, but I am pleased nonetheless, lad, to know my faith and trust were so well-placed."

Wen continued staring at Aedhir. She did not know what to say. She had fully expected that he had figured her out; he had realized who she was. She had braced herself for it, readied herself for his reaction, and now felt bewildered and dismayed.

"I know I do not need to worry for the crew on this boat," Aedhir said. "They are seasoned Navy men, and I can depend on their good sense and manners. However, we are likely to be at sea awhile—it is at least a twelve-day sail to northern Lydia—and it is important that Tacita feels at ease while she is among us. She has expressed to me that she feels as such in your company.

"I would like for you to keep near to her, offer whatever you can to see that she is made comfortable. We will need to make landfall every so often—more than we might ordinarily in such circumstances, because she cannot relieve herself over the side of the longboat as we can. I know that I can depend on you to escort her to points of relative privacy along the shore where she might...tend to this discreetly, on that slim chance one of the others might be tempted to be anything less than polite."

Wen turned and looked over her shoulder toward the woman, Tacita Metella. Tacita had roused, if she had ever been asleep at all, and sat up against her nest of blankets, tucking her long, disheveled blond hair behind her ears. She watched the sailors stirring and stumbling to their feet about her, stretching and yawning and griping about the cold, all the while her large blue eyes were wide and alert, her gaze curious, nearly fascinated.

"It is an important favor I am asking of you, Wen," Aedhir said, drawing her gaze. "And I am asking because I know I can trust you to it. Would you do this for me?"

"Yes, sir," Wen said softly. She lowered her face toward the polished toes of her leather jackboots, struggling not to let her disappointment show in her face.

"Thank you," Aedhir said. His eyes traveled beyond her shoulder, and he smiled. "Hullo, Pryce. How are you this morrow?"

“I was lovely until Thierley planted his bloody foot in my ass to wake me,” Pryce grumbled, shuffling toward them. He was still more asleep than awake, his face set in a groggy scowl, his hair askew, his blankets wrapped around his shoulders. He looked at Aedhir, dazed and imploring. “Mother Above, please tell me we have tea.”

“I think the Oirat are planning to wage war against the empire, to try and drive the Torachans out of Ulus,” Aedhir said. He had gathered the crew of the longboat together, and they all sat along the benches facing the mast. Aedhir stood beneath the broad expanse of unfurled sail, turning his gaze in a sweeping arc as he addressed them.

“The Oirat have never acknowledged the Torachan rule of their land,” he said. “They have fought vigilantly against both the imperial legions and their own northern people, the Khahl since the Morthir united ten years ago. They are considered enemies of the state, and from what I have heard of them, and what Tacita has shared with me, they seem determined to break free from Torach.

“The part of Ulus the Oirat claim as their land is called the Nuqut. It stretches north into the Khar mountains along the border with Lydia. They are a nomadic people, constantly on the move to avoid capture by the Khahl and Torachans, and I am willing to wager that more than once, these travels have brought them deep into the mountains, and even into Lydia for shelter and defense.”

Aedhir clasped his hands lightly against the small of his back, his brows drawn, his expression grave. “I believe they found something there in the mountains. Lydia and the Khar mountains used to be part of ancient Tirgeimhreadh—the realm of the Abhacan. Abhacans lived there up until about five thousand years ago, even after many of them had migrated to Tiralainn, if I am to understand Mister Frankley’s history tutelage correctly. The Abhacan historically build their cities underground, both for protection and secrecy, and because their industries revolve around mining. Mister Frankley said they were fond of building armories deep beneath the earth, stockpiling armor and weapons in the event of war.

“They carried this penchant along with them to Tiralainn,” he said. “It was the discovery of one of these sorts of stockpiles beneath the fortress of Dorchadas that armed Lahnduren and his army of Mianach followers from the northern expanse in their

rebellion against King Herdranges in the years before the First War. I think the Oirat have found themselves a similar armory beneath the Khahl mountains, abandoned and hidden by the ancient Abhacans, and they plan to outfit themselves with these supplies in war against Torach.”

Wen sat between Pryce and Odhran facing Aedhir. Tacita sat across from them on a nearby bench, her hands folded in her lap, her gaze fixed on Aedhir. Wen kept stealing glances at the woman; she did not like Tacita, and trusted her even less.

“If they have the armory already, sir, why would they need Lord Fabhcun?” Pryce asked. “You said the rubbing Mister Frankley showed us seems to indicate they need Lord Fabhcun—his familiarity with the Abhacan language—to read something for them. What could they possibly need him to read? Do you not think it more likely that this shaman you met at the Capuan wharf overheard Lord Fabhcun say he was ambassador to the empire, sir, and the rubbing was just a ploy to pique his curiosity, to lure him to come with the Oirat? You told us you think that was their intention from the first—that they might have tried on the waterfront, had you not stepped out of the harbormaster’s office. Maybe they hope to use Lord Fabhcun as some sort of collateral against the empire, a bargaining tool.”

The corner of Aedhir’s mouth hooked slightly at Pryce in a pleased, fleeting smile. “I have considered that, yes, Lieutenant,” he said. “And I might lean toward that assumption had Rhyden not offered me a peculiar comment that has remained in my mind, and troubled me. Mister Frankley said much the same—the runes on that inscription are of the eighth dynastic variety. Rhyden and Odhran both told me the only authenticated example of this alphabet is on exhibit at the royal museum in Iarnrod. Rhyden knew where this example came from—and I do, too.”

Odhran and Wen glanced at one another, perplexed.

“When Lahnduren found the Abhacan armory beneath his fortress, he found something else the Abhacan had left behind, as well,” Aedhir said. “A threshold—a pair of enormous, sealed doors made out of black granite, inscribed with some sort of gold-inlaid rune characters and markings. Eighth dynastic Abhacan runes, to be exact. The doors are on display now at the royal museum in Iarnrod.

“Again, I think the Oirat might have had similar luck as Lahnduren,” Aedhir said. “I think they found a threshold like the one beneath Dorchadas, and I think they need Rhyden to read its inscriptions for them.”

“Why?” Thierley asked, standing with his rump resting against the side of the boat, his arms crossed against his broad chest.

“So they can open the doors, Mister Feldwick,” Aedhir replied. “And that is precisely what frightens me.”

This frank admittance visibly unnerved the crew. Most of them had sailed with Aedhir for at least two years, if not significantly longer, and none among them had ever heard the Captain say that something frightened him. They exchanged anxious, uncertain glances among them, and a low murmur stirred from the benches.

“Rhyden told me the granite doors had been used to seal Ciardha beneath the Barren mountains, in the tunnels beneath Dorchadas,” Aedhir said.

“Ciardha?” Odhran asked, puzzled. “Lahnduren’s Queen during the First War?”

“A woman could not live sealed beneath the mountains for any length of time, sir, if you will pardon me for saying so,” one of the sailors, a young man named Semias Lehern said.

“She was not a woman,” said another crewman, Phelim Robillard, in a quiet voice. “Ciardha Noalan was a witch.” The sailors around him all chuckled at this, poking him with their elbows, teasing him good-naturedly. “She was! My mother told me.”

“Mine, too,” said Deaglan Arles, grinning, his voice pitched as though he entertained children before a campfire. “She bewitched the water, turned men into monsters, the forests into swamps.”

“She could see everything, in every corner of the Bith,” said Tuathal Millichamp, leaning his shoulder against Deaglan’s and adopting the same melodramatic tone to his voice. “She had an enchanted mirror, and flocks of ravens and vultures that flew all over. She could see through their eyes in the mirror.”

“And wolves, too, eh, Phelim?” laughed Prew Brumford, rising from his bench and leaning forward to tousle Phelim’s hair playfully. “Wolves that ate naughty little lads and lasses who did not eat their legumes—the trees would tattle on ’em to her, because she could hear them talking, too!”

“And spiders,” chimed Euan Fancott. “Do not forget the giant spiders that she turned loose in the woods all ’round Belgaeran.” He hooked his fingers, wagging them, mimicking a spider’s gait.

“Plenty of men went into the woods,” Jobin Dunster chimed merrily. “But not a damn one ever made it out!”

The men all snorted and guffawed. Poor Phelim, who had been rather sincere in his comment about witchery, blushed brightly and hunched his shoulders.

“Witch or not, she would have had to live underground behind those Dwarf doors for thousands of years,” Sengel Jukes said with a frown.

“Even an Elf cannot do that—not without food and water, fresh air,” said another, Frey Goldron.

“That is Elf folklore, nothing more,” snorted Duffin Nevyne. “Stories to frighten children at bedtime.”

Aedhir smirked wryly. “Ciardha was Lahnduren’s Queen indeed, Mister Frankley, but she was no woman, Mister Lehern—and no Elf besides, and she is certainly not folklore, Mister Nevyne. I am not going to offer explanations one way or the other. I know the history of the First War, of Lahnduren and his Queen that you all have been taught, and I am not one to refute it. I do not know what happened beneath Dorchadas. But I do know that I saw things I cannot explain—not even now—during my own service in the First War. Maybe it was magic, and maybe it was only my youthful impression of events.

“Whatever it was, I believe the Abhacan felt like they imprisoned something powerful—and evil—behind their doors. Whether Lahnduren found this or not when he opened them is up to your point of view, and really of no consequence. What is of consequence is that the Oirat might have found a similar threshold, and they think it contains something important. Maybe lore from the Abhacans has been passed by word of mouth among their people for millennia, and they believe something magical lies beyond that will help them in their rebellion against the empire.

“Legends in Tiralainn say Lahnduren had to read the Abhacan inscription to open the doors beneath Dorchadas. Maybe Oirat stories say the same about whatever threshold they have discovered in the Khar. They want Rhyden to read the inscriptions,

to open the doors for them, and so they took him. I am not saying we should believe in such magic. I am saying the Oirat do—and that makes them dangerous.”

“That makes them bloody mad,” Thierley muttered, a comment that elicited a round of murmured concurrences from the sailors.

“The Oirat are a simple, ignorant people who have managed to survive thousands of years with this belief system, this faith in magic,” Aedhir said. “They have outlasted any attempts to defeat them, by both the Khahl and the Torachans. That is what we are up against, lads. I know all of you freely agreed to join me in this, and I wanted you to be aware of exactly what I think we are facing.”

“Hoah, and it is too bloody late now to change our minds and turn ’round,” laughed Prew Brumford.

“Yes, Mister Brumford, it is,” Aedhir said. “I have no intention of letting these people reach the Khar Mountains, to bring Rhyden ashore. We will stop them however we are able before then. I want every man aboard this boat to keep his eyes sharp and his ears keen. Any sign of the Oirat—a flutter of smoke from the shoreline, a hint of voices on the wind—and I want it reported. Officers will bear firearms, and you crewmen will keep swords on your belts at all times, because when we find them, they will fight us, and I would see us ready. Do you understand?”

“The empire will do nothing?” Semias Lehern said. “Lord Fabhcun is an ambassador.”

“The rot bastard propraetor I spoke with in Capua seemed most unconvinced and uncooperative,” Aedhir said. “He said he would send word to Cneas and let them decide if they would help us, but I think I would more likely fire twenty-four pound cannonballs from my ass with a modicum of accuracy than depend on the empire.”

The crew laughed at this.

“Kierken will not send soldiers to help us, Captain Fainne?” Wen asked, quietly. “I thought the King and Lord Fabhcun were friends, sir.”

“They are, but this is Torach, not Tiralainn, Mister Poel,” Aedhir said gently. “No matter how much Kierken might want help Rhyden when he learns of this, Torach will not likely let him send armed soldiers into their territories to search.” He looked about at the crew. “So mark this, as well, gentlemen. Torachan frigates do not typically sail north

of Lunan Bay, and we are keeping close enough along shore to run aground and find safety on land if we encounter one, but we are not supposed to be here. We have no authority and no jurisdiction. If we are discovered by the Torachan armada or ground troops, we are likely in a pinch, and I would remind you all that we are in the service of the Tiralainn Crown Navy, and we should act with the appropriate decorum.”

“Thrash their bloody asses and leave the Good Mother to sort through what is left?” Jobin Dunster asked, grinning broadly, drawing laughter from his fellows.

Aedhir dropped him a wink. “That is an order, Mister Dunster.”

“Have you any good news, Captain Fainne?” Thierley asked, smirking, and again, the crew laughed.

Aedhir chuckled. “We are sailing due north by the wind, running at five knots, so we are making excellent time, Mister Feldwick. I find that good news.”

“Aye, Captain,” Thierley said.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Aedhir told the crew. “I know we are all cold and weary, and Mister Fancott forgot the bloody tea...” Laughter fluttered again. “But we are in this together, the lot of us, and I am grateful to you all. Kindly see Mister Feldwick for your weapon assignments. Carry them wisely and well—all of you.”

He clapped his hands together and smiled. “Dismissed, gentlemen. Let us have a good day at sea.”

Chapter Five

By eleven o'clock that morning, the crew of the longboat had settled themselves in a suitable and relatively comfortable routine. With lookouts posted, crewmen to man the sail, yard and helm and others marking their progress in charts with astrolabe and log-heaving, the rest were contented to remain idle, engaging in quiet, light conversation, tending to matters of hygiene such as shaving, or dividing rations of dried meat and hardened biscuits among themselves for lunch.

Some sat along the benches, drawing sharpening stones along the lengths of their swords and knives, while others still, under Thierley's watchful eye and instruction, prepared loads of black powder, pellet and wadding wrapped together for the an'dagas and isneachan. Some cast makeshift lines off the sides of the longboat, trolling for fish baited with weevils discovered in some of the biscuits, and others finished rolling blankets into tight bundles and stowing them beneath the benches until the evening.

Wen, Pryce and Odhran sat together, helping crewmembers prepare firearm loads. The men around them listened with great and attentive interest as Odhran discussed the development of the united Morthir.

"Most of the larger realms have warred for millennia," he explained as they worked. "But the Torachans were always the strongest. We generally think of them as a violent realm, laying siege and assaulting their weaker neighbors, but the Torachans had much more simple and effective methods to bring the other states 'round to the empire."

"Like what?" asked Jobin Dunster, sitting cross-legged on the floor of the boat, his fingers busy before his face as he wrapped and tucked wadding into a load.

"The same way Herdranges won the war for menfolk against the Elves so long ago," Odhran replied. "The Torachans fought when they had to—but that wasn't often. They had enormous, well-equipped, fastidiously trained armies and massive weapons of siege warfare some of the less civilized states, like Ebesun, Galjin and Teutoni had never seen before—weapons like the trebuchet, or ballista. Sometimes the sight of these legions was enough to terrify a territory into surrendering. But the key to a strong

empire is not necessarily getting the empire—it is keeping it once it is yours, and the Torachan used their forces mostly to defend and hold lands they acquired.

“Most times, to lay claim to a territory, they simply cut off supplies to their enemies. They would destroy fishing harbors and boats, burn or seize farmlands and crops. They would camp around villages and towns and keep food from coming in to the people. They would sit there all year long if they had to; they had enough men for the task. They would catapult dead animal carcasses over fortifying walls, or weigh them down with iron, stones, sink them into streams to pollute a town’s water source, spread disease. They let the people get sick enough, hungry enough and eventually, they would surrender.

“That is how Herdranges defeated the Elves. He blockaded Belgaeran, forced them into surrender. He was the son of the Torachan King who had left his homeland for Tiralainn because he was not heir apparent to the throne. Herdranges knew all of the clever methods his people used to conquer their enemies, and he used them against the Elves.”

“If the empire is so bloody damn effective, how come they cannot rid themselves of these Oirat?” Jobin Dunster asked.

“Hoah, yes, or those wild people in the north—what are they called?” said Deaglan Arles.

“Enghan,” Tacita said, drawing the men’s attention. She had been sitting nearby, quiet all the while, listening to their conversation. “They are the eight allied tribes of the realm of Engjold, called Enghan.”

Odhran blinked at her, surprised. When Tacita met his gaze and smiled, it sent a furious flush blazing brightly in Odhran’s cheeks. “Uh, yes,” he said, nodding. “Yes, ma’am, that is right.” He turned to Jobin. “You see, the Enghan do not have anything to lay siege against, and the sort tactics the Torachans have used for centuries are ineffectual against them. The Enghan live sort of like these Oirat must, to hear Captain Fainne tell of them—in small villages. They do not have large cities or fortresses. They are readily mobile, and very self-sufficient.

“The Enghan are also brutally skilled warriors. They are unafraid to fight and they like to ambush their enemies, even when they are outnumbered. I have heard there is

even a field report sent by a Torachan military leader in 1742 on record at the imperial archives in Cneas, that states a group of one thousand Enghan warriors on bergelmirs decimated a Torachan legion of thrice their numbers like a scythe through ripened wheat.

“Years ago, Torach would send its armada north to the Ionium Sea to try and blockade the Enghan’s fishing and sea trade, as they had with Lydia. But because most of the ports and harbors in Engjold are very long—sometimes hundreds of miles—and narrow, and the Engjold are historically seafarers, they never had much success. The Enghan knew how to outrun the Torachan tall ships, and how to defend their harbors. They only have little longboats like this one, from what I understand, and some maybe twice as long, their warships, but they could still take out a fully armed man-of-war. They used fireships—they set a boat afire beyond an armada line of ships and let the tidal currents carry it straight into them.

“The Torachans seldom send their fleet that far north past the Garyelloch Isles anymore, as Captain Fainne said—the journey is long and treacherous, and the Ionium Sea can be laden with ice.” Odhran smirked. “And I think they must have tired of getting trounced by so-called savages and wild men.”

“You do not think they are wild, then, Odhran?” Pryce asked, raising his brow.

“There have been free Enghan living in Engjold for five thousand years at least,” Odhran said. “I think it takes more than wildness to accomplish that. They are also highly adapted to living in a very harsh environment, surrounded by some of the tallest, most impassable mountains in the known Bith—the Urlug and Nordr ranges. Entire legions of Torachan soldiers have been said to freeze to death following Enghan into the mountains in the autumn, and becoming snowbound and trapped there when winter arrives in force.”

Pryce looked impressed, and Odhran glanced down at his hands, offering a sheepish shrug. “I am sorry,” he said. “The Enghan were my favorite to learn about. Wen has listened to me ramble for hours about them before. We actually know very little about them in Tiralainn, but they fascinate me. It is like they want it more, do you know? Torach wants to claim them for the empire, but they want to be free—and they want it more. That sort of tenacity...that determination...it just astounds me.”

“They sound like vermin to me,” said Semias Lehern with a frown. “No better than bloody damn rats, just like these Oirat. They hunker themselves into the cracks and crevices of the Bith, just like rats in Belgaeran sewers, waiting for the cats to come and root them out.”

Odhran blinked at Semias, visibly wounded, and Pryce said, “Rats and vermin have managed to survive on the Bith ages before we were around, Semias, and in places we can never tread. They will likely be here long after we are all worm fodder and gone. Maybe we could learn something from them.”

Semias chuckled. “You go right ahead and admire the rats, then, Lieutenant,” he said without affront in his tone. He grinned. “As for me, I shall side with the cats, I think.”

“Captain Fainne!” Tuathal Millichamp shouted out loudly from his lookout position at the corner of the bow. “Captain Fainne—hoah!”

His cry startled the crewmen, who all looked up, their eyes flown wide in alarm. Aedhir had been standing at the stern of the longboat, supervising the log recordings, but his head shot up at Tuathal’s shout, and he sprang forward, striding briskly down the center of the boat.

“What is it, Mister Millichamp?” he called out.

Tuathal gazed out over the starboard side of the boat now, a scope poised against his eye again as he looked toward the Torachan coast. “I see a mark on the shore, sir. Looks like a troughline from a keel brought aground in the mud, sir.”

“Where?” Aedhir said, as Tuathal turned, passing him the scope. He raised it to his face and followed the line of Tuathal’s arm as the young man pointed, directing his gaze.

“Do you see it, Captain?” Tuathal asked, suddenly breathless with excitement. “It must have happened recently, sir, within the last hours, surely, or else the surf would have washed it away.”

“I see it.” Aedhir lowered the scope and turned his head, calling out to the helm. “Mister Goldron, about ship to starboard. Bear us in with the land a’main.”

“Aye, Captain,” Frey Goldron called back. “Bringing her about to starboard, sir.”

The other crewmen had risen to their feet anxiously, and Pryce hurried over to Aedhir's side, pressing his hands against the top of the bulwark and leaning out over the water, peering toward shore. "Any sign of them in the water, sir?"

Aedhir swept the shoreline with the scope, searching vainly for any sign of the boat that had left a shallow trench carved in the damp beach. "No," he said. "And I do not see any debris on the shore, signs of a camp or a fire. I do not think they stopped long."

"Maybe we should not stop at all, then," Pryce said, drawing his gaze. "We will lose time, Captain. If they were only here hours ago, it means their lead is not so great on us."

"We have to stop," Aedhir said. "We do not know what made them come aground. Maybe their boat is damaged, and there could be evidence of repairs we might find. Maybe Rhyden fought with them, resisted or something, swam ashore and they..." His voice faded and he gazed out over the water, his brows drawn.

"They would not harm him, Aedhir," Pryce said. He rested his hand against Aedhir's shoulder in reassurance. "They need him. No purpose would be served in hurting him."

They ran the longboat aground along the same scrap of beach the Oirat had visited. Even before their keel had dragged against the soft silt of the shallows, they could see evidence of activity left in the damp sand. There were footprints all around, numerous sets. Aedhir hopped over the port side of the boat, his boot soles splashing noisily in the water as he hurried toward the cleft mark left in the mud.

"Mister Feldwick, you are with me," he called out, and he turned, looking over his shoulder at the boat. "The rest of you stay aboard for the moment."

"Aye, Captain," Thierley said, planting his large palm against the top of the bulwark and swinging his legs over, dropping over the side of the longboat and into the shallow water. The two men walked together, moving slowly, their eyes trained on the ground, their an'dagas unholstered and gripped at the ready in their hands.

"Lot of footprints here," Thierley remarked quietly.

Aedhir nodded. "At least a dozen of them, would you say, Thierley?"

Thierley glanced at him. "I would say, yes, Captain, and likely more."

Aedhir froze, his eyes flying wide, his breath stilled as he spied a new set of prints left in the soft, wet silt. The Oirat footprints were apparent and distinct; they all seemed to wear some rounded, heavy-soled boot or shoe, with wide heels and toes. This new set appeared to have been made by someone barefooted walking from the water onto the shore, someone with long, narrow feet, a sharp arch delineating the ball of the foot from the heel and long, slender toes. Aedhir knelt next to the footprints, and studied them for a long, quiet moment. He raised his gaze, following their progression from the beach to the woods. “These are Rhyden’s.”

“Are you certain?” Thierley asked, scanning the pine forest with his eyes, his brows narrowed, his mouth turned down in a grave frown.

“Yes,” Aedhir said, and he brushed his fingertips against the outline of elongated, prehensile toes. “A Gaeilge Elf left these marks. They have very distinctive toes, longer than ours from where they used to live in the trees.” He stood. “He was here.”

“Looks like he went into the forest,” Thierley said, moving forward, following Rhyden’s tracks. He glanced over his shoulder at Aedhir. “And he was not alone. Two in front of him, I would say, and one behind. No signs of a struggle I can see, but then again, there are not too many reasons three men might accompany someone who is a prisoner to them out into the trees.”

Aedhir cocked the doghead of his pistol, his brows furrowed. “By my breath, if they hurt him...” he seethed through gritted teeth. He broke into a wide stride, nearly a lope, rushing past Thierley into the trees. He called out loudly, turning his face into the treetops. “Rhyden! Rhyden, can you hear me?”

Come on, Rhyden, he thought desperately as he tromped among the pine trees, his eyes darting all about, his an’daga poised before him. *Tell me you fought them off and ran, bolted for the trees. You were barefooted—even if your hands were bound, you could have climbed high enough to hide from them. Be here somewhere. Be alive here, and unhurt. Please, Rhyden.*

“Rhyden!” he shouted again. His voice reverberated in the damp, cold air, and he heard a fluttering coo and the whisper of feathers as startled doves flew off among the pine boughs overhead at the sound.

“Lord Fabhcun!” Thierley called, following Aedhir. “Come out now! You are safe!”

Aedhir saw no signs of struggle, no blood on the ground. If the Oirat had meant harm to Rhyden, if they had brought him ashore to kill him for some reason, they would not have traipsed far into the woods to do it. They obviously did not suspect pursuit, given the plain and apparent keel mark and footprints left on the beach. There would have been no reason to lead Rhyden deep among the trees to murder him. They were miles from any civilized place. There was no one who could hear Rhyden scream, no one to stumble upon his body by accident.

“They did not kill him,” Aedhir said, and he uttered a soft, warbling sigh of relief. “I do not know why they brought him here, but it was not to kill him.”

“Maybe the three of them...took a turn with him,” Thierley said, and Aedhir glowered. “What? You said they were savages. It does not get much more savage than that, you ask me.”

“Tacita told me sodomy is abhorrent to the Ulusians,” Aedhir said. “Something about they think we all have a male and a female aspect to our natures, so it would mess up your spirit somehow.”

Thierley raised his brow. “There is no female aspect to my nature, that is for damn rot sure.”

“I did not say I believed it, Thierley—the Oirat do. They would not rape him. That was one of my biggest concerns and I asked Tacita about it last night. She said they would consider it discourteous.”

“And how precisely does this little woman know so much about what these Oirat do or do not consider courteous?” Thierley asked.

“She traveled for ten years with a missionary throughout the empire,” Aedhir said.

“So she says.”

“She is very familiar with a lot of the indigenous cultures.”

“Yes, so she says.”

“I believe her, Thierley,” Aedhir said with a frown.

“You do not know anything about her, Captain Fainne,” Thierley told him pointedly.

“I know enough about her to know she has led me right so far,” Aedhir replied. “She said they have Rhyden, and there on the beach is evidence of Rhyden in their

company—his footprints in the mud with theirs. She said they traveled by boat northward, and there is a keel trough in the mud as evidence that they have been here, following the Ionium current north in a boat.”

He stomped past Thierley, searching the underbrush, the ground for signs of Rhyden. “I believe her.”

“Fair enough,” Thierley said. “So if they brought him here, and they did not kill or bugger him, what happened to him? Where did he go? I only saw one set of footprints coming into the forest from the beach. I did not see any leading out again.”

Aedhir froze, realizing Thierley was right.

“If the Oirat need him so badly, I would assume they would not just run off and leave him,” Thierley said.

“There must be tracks on the beach,” Aedhir said. “Something we missed. They are all tromped together, overlapping by the water’s edge. They must have led him into the trees and then back to the boat another way.” He blinked at Thierley. “But why?”

“Maybe he had to relieve himself,” Thierley said, making Aedhir scowl again. Aedhir turned and made his way back toward the beach, tucking his an’daga back beneath the flap of his coat.

“What?” Thierley asked, following him. “It is an honest thought. You assigned little Wen to walk out in the woods with Tacita for that reason. Why would the Oirat not do the same?”

Aedhir paused in mid-stride. *I will be damned*, he thought, glancing at Thierley, his brow raised. *He is right*.

“Of course, it would take more than a scrap Wen’s size to keep a lad like Lord Fabhcun out of trouble,” Thierley said. “So that is why there are three men with him. He had to relieve himself, or he got seasick, or they...”

“They let him get dressed,” Aedhir murmured, turning and walking toward the beach again. *He would have been sold naked from the catasta*, Aedhir thought. *And he would have been dead weight and cumbersome to dress while drugged and unconscious. They were in a hurry last night—eager to leave. They would not have made time for it. Tacita said they had bundled him in blankets and furs to keep him warm. When Boldry’s drug wore off him, when he came to his senses again, they must*

have stopped and brought him into the forest to dress himself. That explains why he was barefooted on the beach.

Aedhir nearly laughed aloud. *They will not hurt him*, he thought. *Not if they can help it. Pryce was right—whatever it is they have found in the mountains, whatever magic they think they will find behind the Abhacan’s threshold, it is valuable enough that they will not harm Rhyden to claim it.*

“Excellent thought, Thierley,” he said, turning to the man-at-arms as Thierley strode abreast of him.

“Yes, well, they come to me sometimes.”

“Keep them coming, then,” Aedhir said, clapping him on the shoulder. “They may well be needed.”

When Aedhir and Thierley returned to the longboat, the Captain ordered the crewmembers to search the beach. The footprints in the mud along the narrow strip were difficult to discern in places where numerous boots had tread, and he wanted to see if more of Rhyden’s barefooted tracks led out of the forest and back to the water.

“Elves have peculiar feet,” he said. “Long and narrow, and most of these boot marks look relatively broad. They might not have had a pair to fit him. Fan out and find bare footprints. Wen, you accompany Tacita into the woods, let her tend to herself. Anything happens, and you call out to me—loudly, lad. The rest of you keep to this track of beach until they return. I do not want one man stepping foot beyond that treeline except Wen, do you understand?”

Wen had to endure murmured japes and good-natured ribbing as Tacita followed her along the beach for the woods. She hunkered her shoulders, keeping her hand wrapped around the grip of her pistol, her brows drawn, her expression surly. *Hoah, I will never hear the bloody end of this*, she thought, frowning as she passed Pryce and he dropped her a little wink and a wry grin. *If I live half the lifetime of a Gaeilge, I will not.*

In truth, she did not mind being assigned as Tacita’s guardian. She could not very well relieve herself over the side of the longboat like the men, either. She had been able to handle this little problem aboard the *a’Maorga* easily enough; the officers’

staterooms had chamberpots in them. She had been somewhat anxious about the matter on the longboat, and was grateful for the fact at least that she, too, could relieve herself without fear. In fact, at the moment, she felt the urge rather insistently, and she walked briskly, scanning the trees with her eyes, searching for a relatively secluded spot.

“We should not wander far,” Tacita said, sounding nervous. She spoke with a slight, peculiar accent, as though the common tongue of the Torachans was not completely familiar to her lips.

“We will not,” Wen replied. She wanted to be well enough away from the beach to feel safe from curious eyes. Aedhir had ordered the men not to pass the treeline, but if they found something, Rhyden’s footprints, they might search the woods in earnest. The last thing Wen needed was one of the crewmen to come stumbling upon her unawares with her breeches dropped about her knees.

She averted her eyes to the ground, and as she passed by a long, narrow stick lying among pine needles and dried leaves, she paused. She had seen plenty of twigs and limbs underfoot as she walked along, but this was barkless, smooth, and perfectly straight, as though it had been deliberately hewn.

“What is it?” Tacita asked.

Wen knelt, slipping her fingertips beneath the stick and lifting it from the ground. She gasped softly, realizing it was no wayward twig at all.

“It is an arrow,” she whispered, drawing the tip close to her face to examine it. The tapered point had been handcrafted from black stone, the edges purposely cleaved to razor-sharpness. The base of the arrowhead was long and narrow, designed to slide securely, deeply into the grooved nock at the tip of the shaft. It had been fettered in place with carefully wound thread—what looked like animal sinew to Wen. The fletchings were of an unfamiliar, dun-colored feather, each secured in grooves along the shaft by more precisely wound lengths of sinew. The overall width of the arrow was about that of Wen’s little finger, a little stouter than standard hunting weight; given the heft of the arrow against her palm, she thought maybe a sixty- or seventy-pound pull on a bow might have seen it fly.

“Where did it come from?” Tacita asked.

“I do not know,” Wen said, standing, keeping the arrow in hand. “One of the Oirat? Maybe Rhyden tried to run and they shot at him.” She looked around; the pines and sequoias here grew in close proximity to one another, and had been for quite some time to judge by their broad trunks. “Though they would have to be lousy shots—or blind—to miss one of these trees.”

She craned her head back, gazing up into the tree. “Rhyden is a Gaeilge Elf,” she said. “His ancestors were arboreal climbers. Maybe he got into the trees somehow, they fired at him and missed. The arrow would have dropped back down to the ground then.” She frowned. “But they could not have had a clear shot at him—not at an Elf aloft in trees so close together. He would have taken off among the boughs like a squirrel.”

“They could have if they were hoyin’irgen,” Tacita said quietly, and Wen turned, her brow raised. “The Ulusians—both the Khahl and the Oirat—have a special hunting style unique to their people. It is called battue. Mounted hunters will startle prey, chase it into the forest, flush it toward what they call the gerkeh—the place of the kill. The hoyin’irgen are hunters who wait among the tree limbs and boughs near here. They sweep the prey into the gerkeh and use their bows to dispatch the animals. The hoyin’irgen are very skilled climbers. I observed a Khahl battue party once, and it is as you said—they moved like squirrels among the trees.”

“Splendid,” Wen murmured, looking up into the tree again, her frown deepening. “There is poor circumstance Rhyden likely did not expect.”

“If that arrow came from the bow of a hoyin’irgen hunter, he missed on purpose,” Tacita said. “Probably to startle Lord Fainne’s friend, halt him. The hoyin’irgen hunters learn from very early childhood to wield a bow with precision. Among their people, the hunt is often how they survive, and there is little room for missed shots. Winters are harsh in Ulus, and the land is unsuitable for most crops. They rely upon meat for much of their diet, and they must kill enough prey to see them through the winter. The Oirat hunt well through even the coldest months. They dig pits in the permafrost, the tundra ground of the steppes and mountain foothill regions where they set up their aysils, or camps, to keep the meat stores frozen and last until the spring.”

Wen looked at her for a long moment. “How is it you know so much of the Oirat?”

Tacita met her gaze evenly. “I have traveled to nearly every corner of the empire in the last ten years. I worked with a missionary of the Mater Matris, and have met nearly every race and culture in what is now the united Morthir.”

“A missionary?” Wen asked.

“Yes.” Tacita nodded. “I was born into slavery, but not raised as a slave. I was raised a member of the donarium paelex sect in Euboea, the capital city of Achaia.”

“I...I am sorry,” Wen said. “I do not know what that means, domina...pell...”

“Donarium paelex,” Tacita said again. “It is a sect of the sacerdotium, the clergy of the Good Mother’s worship.”

“Clergy?” Wen blinked, startled. “You were in the clergy?”

“Yes,” Tacita nodded. “I served in the temple brothel.” Wen blinked again, aghast, and Tacita smiled. “It is a very respected position among my people. A donarium paelex is considered sancrosanctus—sacred and sanctified—in her services. My body was as much a temple to the Mater Matris as any fashioned of stone, my company as much an act of sacred ritual as any proffered upon our Mother’s altars. The monetary offerings tendered for worship through me benefited the temple, and the empire.”

“But you were a prostitute,” Wen said.

“I served my Creator in the fullest of my capabilities as a woman,” Tacita said. “As a member of the sacerdotium, I carried out caerimonia, or divine rituals, just as any other of the clergy. I was chosen to accompany Marcus Aurelius Aquila, a popa, or temple servant and missionary to travel throughout the new empire ten years ago. He and I were but of many sent to establish temples in the imperial states, to teach the people of the ways of the Mater Matris. It was Torachan decree that any other religious beliefs be deemed pagan and banned.”

“How did you come to be at the catasta in Capua?” Wen asked, quietly.

“Unfortunate circumstance,” Tacita said, and her smile faltered, her large eyes growing sad. She looked down at her toes. She had seemed meek last night to Wen, often adopting similar stance, addressing her limited, quiet-spoken comments to the floor, but watching the men on the longboat, listening to them had warmed her, assuaged whatever fears and trepidations had kept her timid at first. Now she averted

her gaze again, looking shame-faced and unhappy. "May I relieve myself, please?" she asked. "It...it has been some time since I last was able, and I...the need is rather urgent."

"Hoah," Wen said, blinking. "Hoah...uh, yes. Of course. I am sorry. Yes, of course you may."

She watched Tacita step behind some trees, disappearing from her view. She heard the soft rustle of fabric as Tacita opened her coat and fumbled with the lacecords of her breeches. When she was satisfied that Tacita was distracted with her own need, Wen ducked behind the nearest pine trunk, her fingers hurriedly unbuttoning the front of her great coat, loosening her own breeches. She reached beneath the flaps of her coats and shoved her pants down, hooking her hand against the tree as she squatted. She had needed to go so badly, she nearly groaned aloud with relief. She felt like she hunkered there for ages, until the muscles in her legs began to tire and burn. When she was finally finished, Wen stood, dancing carefully away from the puddle she had left soaked about the base of the tree. She pulled up her breeches, shoving her underleine and shirt hems into proper place beneath the waistband.

Wen walked around the tree, cinching her fly closed once more and found Tacita waiting for her. "I...I thought I would go, too, as we...we are here and all," Wen said, feeling sheepish, color stoking in her cheeks.

Tacita studied her for a long moment as though curious, making Wen decidedly uncomfortable. "There is an embankment here," Tacita said at length, turning to look over her shoulder behind her. "It is fairly steep and a stream runs below. If Lord Fainne's friend tried to flee, and the Oirat found him here, they likely would have followed the streambed to bring him back to the beach. It leads in that direction, and the banks will be muddy. We might find footprints there."

"No," Wen said, shaking her head. "No, we should go back. If there are footprints, Captain Fainne and the others will find them on the beach."

"The Elf might have fought the Oirat," Tacita said. "They might have knocked him unconscious, carried him back to their boat. Lord Fainne would find no evidence of his tracks on the beach then."

Wen frowned again. “We should go back. Captain Fainne did not tell me to search the woods.”

“I think Captain Fainne would be pleased and grateful for any signs that his friend is unharmed,” Tacita said. “We might find such signs along this stream, even if they cannot at the shore.”

Why would you bloody care what pleases Captain Fainne? Wen thought, scowling. She did not know what to make of Tacita. The woman’s revelation of being a clergy member—and being some sort of sanctioned prostitute for the Torachan temple in Euboea—had startled her. She had simply assumed that Tacita had known a lifetime of slavery, and all of the wretched servitude such entailed. She had not thought very highly of Tacita because of this, even though slavery was certainly no choice of her own. The realization that Tacita had been a prostitute as well—even one considered respectable and sacred—was a bit repulsive, doing little if anything to raise Tacita’s standing in Wen’s regard.

Tacita seemed to have nothing to gain from pleasing Aedhir, but Wen certainly did. More than a young midshipman eager for the chance to please a commanding officer, Wen was a daughter who wanted to know and please her father. Tacita was right; if she could find evidence along the streambed of what might have happened to Rhyden—evidence that might not be apparent on the beach—Aedhir would be very happy and grateful indeed.

Wen sighed, her brows drawing as Tacita looked at her, patiently, wordlessly. “Come on,” Wen said. She turned and slid down the embankment toward the stream, her coat tails flapping behind her, her arms outstretched and pinwheeling for balance as her boot heels skittered in the loose soil and tangled underbrush. Tacita followed, taking slow, tentative steps.

Wen looked about along the streambed. It was a relatively swift-moving stream, its current pooling in broad shallows in places where it had carved meandering curves in the earth. The banks were steep, eroded by rainfall, knotted with exposed roots and tendrils of winter-barren scrub. There was evidence of past springtime floods in the thick, compacted sediment along the sides, when snowfall had melted, swelling the little stream beyond its ordinary boundaries.

It did not take her long to find tracks: two sets of footprints in the sodden mud along the water's edge, a pair made by the Oirat's unusual, broad, rounded-toe boots, and another made by bare feet—narrow feet, with sharp arches and long toes.

"They were here," Wen said, squatting beside the nearest prints. She followed them with her eyes along the trough of the streambed. They seemed to mark a course to the beach once more, just as Tacita had predicted. She looked up at the blond woman, surprised and impressed. "You were right. They did not have to carry Rhyden, at least not here. It looks like he walked on his own, with only one Oirat."

She turned and looked over her shoulder. The footprints made their way from around the sharp curve of a nearby bank wall, where the stream veered sharply to the right and hooked around once more. Wen followed them, moving in the opposite direction of the beach, curious as to where they might have originated.

"Are we not going to follow the tracks to the shore?" Tacita asked from behind her.

Wen paused and knelt again, frowning slightly. She could see dark spatters of some sort near Rhyden's footprints now. She reached down and brushed her gloved fingertips against one and peered closely at her hand. "Blood," she whispered grimly, glancing back at Tacita. "Rhyden was bleeding. Not badly, and not for long—I did not see any blood by his tracks over there. But he was hurt somehow."

"Maybe he fell from the trees," Tacita said.

"Elves do not fall out of trees," Wen replied. "Come on. Let us see."

Tacita looked uncertain. "Do you think it is wise?"

"You are the one who said we should look in the first place," Wen told her, aggravated. "I think if finding the footprints would please Captain Fainne, knowing whether or not Rhyden is alright would please him even more."

"I did not mean we should venture far from the beach," Tacita said. "There are animals in these woods—predators. It may be unsafe."

Wen drew her pistol from beneath her coat, settling her finger against the trigger. "We will be safe enough. Come on."

The two walked together, approaching the corner of the stream curve. Tacita looked about her, anxiously scanning the crest of the sloping embankments with her

eyes as they moved along, while Wen kept her gaze trained on the ground, finding more blood dropped against the mud around Rhyden's footprints. As they rounded the corner, Tacita drew in a sharp, startled breath, and Wen jerked her head up just as Tacita thrust out her arm to stay her, catching her across the chest and nearly sending her staggering into the water.

There was an animal in front of them, maybe ten feet away along the streambed beyond the curve of the embankment. It was probably a good three feet tall at the shoulder, and at least six feet in length. It was wolf-like, at least in form, with a stocky, muscular body and relatively short, strong legs. Its head was enormous in proportion to its body; its snout was at least two feet long from the tip of its nose to the angle of its powerful jaw. It was covered in mottled brown and black fur, and it had apparently been feeding upon the carcass of another large, unfamiliar animal that lay sprawled in the middle of the stream. It raised its head at the women's approach, its blood-smearred lips wrinkling back from its long snout to reveal a mouthful of hooked, bared fangs. It was the most massive, peculiar thing Wen had ever seen, and she froze, her breath tangling in her throat.

"Hoah—!" she gasped, her eyes flown wide, her right hand thrusting out, brandishing the pistol. Her thumb drew back simultaneously, reflexively against the doghead.

"Do not," Tacita hissed, staring at the creature, her body poised and unmoving, her arm locked against Wen's sternum. The animal's small, rounded ears pricked forward and its broad nose wriggled as it sniffed the air. "Do not move," Tacita said softly, and the beast's ears fluttered again at the sound. "Do not shoot it. Do not make a sound."

The animal stepped toward them, planting one wide, clawed paw protectively in front of its prey. It continued to snuffle at the wind, its voice rumbling from its short, muscled neck in a guttural growl.

"It is an ikhama," Tacita whispered, and she began to move her hands slowly, reaching for her coat. Her fingers moved carefully, unfastening the buttons that held the overlapping flaps of wool closed about her breasts. "It cannot see us well...but it can smell us."

"I can take a shot at it," Wen said softly, unmoving.

"No," Tacita breathed. "If you only maim it, you will make it angry and it will attack. Let me deal with it."

"What?" Wen asked, blinking at her. "Are you bloody daft? Look at the size of that thing—it will tear you apart."

"It is a scavenger, not a hunter," Tacita said. "It is not frightened by your weapon or the pain it might bring to it. But it is afraid of one thing."

"What is that?"

"That which is bigger than it." Tacita suddenly strode boldly forward, opening the front of her coat with a dramatic jerk. She held the coat open wide, her arms nearly outstretched in full at her sides, and she stomped her feet loudly against the ground.

She is mad! Wen thought, panicked. *That damn bloody fool is going to see us both mauled!*

The ikhama recoiled at Tacita's sudden approach, its paws scuttling back in the mud. Tacita uttered a fierce, snarling sound at it, a hoarse and furious cry, and she flapped her coat wildly, letting the wool rustle noisily. She rushed at it, slamming her boot heels into the shore, and the ikhama turned tail, lumbering clumsily, swiftly away from her. It scampered along the streambed, rounding the nearest corner and they could hear the sounds of its heavy bulk crashing through dried underbrush and splashing in the water as it fled.

Tacita stopped in mid-stride, lowering her coat once more. She turned to look at Wen over her shoulder, wide-eyed and somewhat breathless. Wen blinked at her, astounded and shocked. "How...how did you know to do that?"

"I have seen them before," Tacita said. "Marcus and I would encounter them sometimes in Lydia and Ulus. They keep around shorelines and streambeds, where predators often leave carcasses after their kills." She looked after the ikhama, her brows pinched. "We should leave. My scent was unfamiliar to it, and I gave it a fright, but it will not keep from fresh meat for too long."

Wen lowered her pistol to her side, trembling. Her heart was still pounding in fright and she pressed her hand against the lapels of her coat as if she meant to still its rhythm with her palm. "I...I do not think I have ever seen anything so huge in my life."

“The forest is likely full of them,” Tacita said. She nodded toward the dead animal lying in the water as she buttoned her coat. “And those, as well.”

“What is it?”

“A narsana,” Tacita said. She knelt beside the beast, cocking her head at an angle as she studied it. “They are the largest predators in the northern Morthir, and the most dangerous. They typically hunt in packs.” She brushed her fingertips against the pale, mottled fur of the narsana’s underbelly, and arched her brow. “Though this one is probably a rogue—a male that has lost a bid for dominance and been forced out of his group.”

Tacita leaned toward the animal’s head, curling her hand against something protruding from its wide skull. For the first time, Wen noticed the narsana had been felled by a well-placed arrow. Tacita shifted her weight, wrenching the long shaft loose from the narsana’s body. “The Oirat must have killed it.”

Wen went to her, taking the arrow, sparing a long, incredulous look at the narsana. It was at least as big as the ikhama that had been feeding on it. It, too, was long and muscled; it had a short, broad muzzle and a wide mouth. Its paws were immense, the front pair armed with formidable prehensile claws, almost like thumbs. Tacita stood and she and Wen studied the arrow together. There was no mistaking the dun-colored fletchings, the meticulous sinew bindings, the tip of hewn black stone. The Oirat had indeed killed the beast.

“It might have tried to attack the Elf,” Tacita said. “Perhaps that is why you found blood among his footprints.”

Wen looked around and found a small section of embankment to her left that looked disturbed. The margin between the wall and stream was very narrow here, and dirt had been cleaved and upturned, roots and brush torn and snagged. Loose gravel and mud clots had tumbled to the streambed, laying in haphazard piles. She walked over to the bank, peering closely at some telltale spots left spattered and smeared along this roughly carved path.

“More blood,” she murmured, craning her eyes toward the top of the embankment. She reached up, planting her hands against the dirt and then clambered up the steep slope, peeping over the crest. She could see broken tree limbs beneath a

nearby pine tree; long, thick limbs that had splintered into several pieces and appeared to be rotted inside. Wen slid back down to the streambed again and turned to Tacita, brushing off the front of her coat.

“You were right again,” she said. “I think Rhyden fell here. It looks like a rotten branch in that pine tree above us broke underneath him, and it probably spilled him clear to the ground. He might have hit his head, knocked the senses out of himself and rolled down the embankment here, landing in the stream.”

“Narsana are fiercely territorial,” Tacita remarked. “This rogue might have had this streambed staked out for prey. If the Elf was bleeding, the narsana would have been attracted by the scent of his blood.”

“So the narsana attacked Rhyden,” Wen said. “And one of the Oirat archers saved him, led him back to the beach. Elves can heal very quickly. If he had not hurt himself too badly, only dazed himself in the fall, that might account for the blood disappearing from their trail and why he could walk on his own.” She frowned slightly. “He must have realized it was pointless to try and run—if the Oirat did not catch him first, one of these things, these narsana might.”

“Lord Fainne is right, I think,” Tacita said. “The Oirat have some purpose in mind for his friend. They will not let him escape, or see harm come to him. Whatever they believe he can lead them to, it must be very important to them.”

“Any idea what that might be? You seem to know more about them than the rest of us combined.”

Tacita shook her head. “No,” she said. “I only know of the Oirat what I have learned from the northern Ulusians—the Khahl. I do not know much of their beliefs, or why they would need the Elf.”

She seemed sincere enough in her words, but there was something that passed briefly across her face, a troubled sort of cast that came quickly and faded, and as she averted her gaze, her eyes darting down toward the fallen narsana, Wen thought to herself, *She is lying.*

“We should leave,” Tacita said, looking up at Wen.

She is lying about the Oirat, Wen thought again. Maybe she does not know for certain why they want Rhyden...but she has her suspicions. Why would she keep them secret?

“We should go back to the beach,” Tacita said. “The ikhama might return, and I do not think it will fall for the same ruse a second time.”

Wen nodded. She tucked the bloodied arrow into her pocket with the first they had found, the fletchings brushing against her elbow. “Captain Fainne will want to see these,” she said, and she began to follow Rhyden’s footsteps, making her way along the streambed.

As the two women walked alongside one another, making their way toward the longboat, Wen glanced at Tacita briefly, her brows drawn. Tacita said nothing more, and kept her eyes on the ground.

She is lying, Wen thought. I do not know why, but she is. There is something she is not telling me—or Father. What are you playing at, Tacita?

Tacita sensed the weight of Wen’s gaze and turned to her, curious. Wen looked away, pretending to absorb her attention with Rhyden’s distinctive tracks along the mud.

What are you playing at? she thought again.

Chapter Six

“Mother Above,” Aulus Tertius whispered, his voice hoarse with wonder.

He stood in the doorway of a shrine, a hall with vaulted ceilings, polished marble floors and walls adorned with large, colorful, meticulously painted murals. The room was filled with artifacts: statues displayed upon granite blocks; weapons mounted on velveteen-backed frames and what appeared to be some sort of oversized leather saddle draped across a large wooden rack.

The shrine was housed in a separate building from the palace of the Kagan, what Aulus had at first mistaken for some sort of mausoleum or familial crypt given its modest size, but elaborate facade. The crypt was nestled on the royal grounds and surrounded by a small, tranquil garden replete with reflecting pools and statuary, winter-dormant trees and shrubs. It seemed to attract an influx of Khahl noblemen and tribal officials—so many, in fact, that it had at last occurred to Aulus that it was no mausoleum at all, but rather some sort of pagan temple, of which the Torachan empire would certainly not approve.

Aulus had never ventured into the building before that afternoon, but from the window of his chamber, he had observed plenty of people coming and going across its threshold. He had avoided investigating the shrine for as long as he possibly could for no reason other than he loathed the idea of struggling into heavy layers of clothing, boots, scarf, hat and gloves and then shuffling his way through the heaping mounds of snow to reach it.

Targutai and the Minghan jagun had been gone from Kharhorin on their supposed hunt for almost two weeks, and in that time, the number of visitors to the shrine had increased significantly, more with every passing day. At last, Aulus’ curiosity and suspicions had bested him, and he had forced himself out-of-doors. He had tromped across the garden, his eyes squinted tightly against the frigid wind, his nose watering freely against the folds of his woolen scarf. He had mounted the broad staircase—and damn near spilled onto his ass in a snowbank as his boot soles skittered for purchase on the ice-slickened stone—and entered the temple.

There were no guards or attendants within the shrine, but oil lamps and candles had been arranged throughout the hall, offering warm light. Incense smoldered within decorative brass containers, filling the room with the heady fragrance of dried spices and smoke. For the moment at least, Aulus was the only visitor the temple entertained and he stood upon the threshold, incredulous and awestruck. He shivered despite his thick layers of clothing and his breath frosted in the air before him. Snow melted beneath his boots in small puddles and he stared all about him, his eyes wide, his mouth agape as he lowered his scarf from his face.

What is this place? Aulus walked forward, his footsteps echoing against the stone walls and expansive floor.

The murals on the walls depicted several large, intricate scenes, and as he moved toward the center of the chamber, Aulus paused, examining each in turn. The first showed an enormous yellow dragon lying on its belly, framed by mountain peaks. The artist had painted the dragon with a melancholy expression on its face, and a man nearby, dressed in vestments like that of an Oirat. The Oirat man was clearly meant to be some sort of insidious character; his face was portrayed with sharply arched brows and shadows beneath his eyes, nearly a caricature of wicked intent. He approached the dragon with his hands outstretched, offering what appeared to be raw meat.

The next mural showed the same yellow dragon slumped and lifeless now, and the Oirat man smiling with menacing glee. The sky above them was filled with dragons in flight, in the distance but apparently approaching. The next showed the Oirat man with another, one smaller in stature beside him. It took Aulus a long moment before he realized it was supposed to be a Dwarf, one of the ancient inhabitants of ancient Tirgeimhreadh—what was now most of northern Torach and Lydia—and not a child. The Dwarf looked as sinister in his visage as the Oirat man, and the two of them seemed to be rolling large stones into place, sealing off the entrance to a cave.

What is all of this? Aulus thought, puzzled. Obviously the pictures were meant to recount a story, but it was one he was unfamiliar with. He had learned what he could about Ulusian history—which was precious and pathetic little—before leaving Serdica for his new appointment, and he knew by ancient legend and lore, the Ulusians were once supposed to have been dragonriders. There were no dragons, of course. Rumor

within the empire had once claimed that the carcass of one had been discovered in the western slopes of the Khar mountains in Lydia, frozen and preserved in a receding glacier. More than one hundred Torachan soldiers claimed to have seen the beast with their own eyes, but when imperial officials went to claim it and ship the dead dragon's remains back to Cneas, it had seemingly vanished without a trace. Aulus had always considered the story—and the legends of the Ulusian dragonriders—to be nonsensical drivel.

Drivel or not, the Khahl believed in it enough to plaster some sort of story about dragons all over the walls of the shrine. One mural showed a young man dressed in the garb of a Khahl folded in prostrate grief over an older man's withered, lifeless body. The next showed this young Khahl being anointed with a crown, clearly indicating he was a Kagan. Others showed battle scenes, paintings of bloody war waged for ages between the Oirat and the Khahl. The last and largest mural, found at the rear wall of the temple showed another young Khahl man on his knees among the mountains, his face upturned toward the sky, his arms outstretched. Sunlight spilled on his face in a glorious corona, and the front of his bufu was unfettered, revealing a series of marks upon his bare chest—seven round places over his heart, with four forming a sort of circle and three running down to his ribs. Behind the young man, the sky was filled with dragons—they seemed to rise from the ground, soaring up toward the painted clouds.

Aulus walked over to the saddle. It was ancient, brittle and rotted to the stringy sinew of the hide in places. He realized this was likely something the Ulusians purported to have used to ride dragons.

As if one can mount a myth, he thought with a sharp, derisive snort. Unlike a horse's saddle that lay relatively flat, this one bowed in the middle, hooking sharply up to a crested pommel ridge. The seat rose in the back to what would be the middle of a man's spine while sitting. Broad flaps of thick leather were drawn about each stirrup and fastened in place, designed to protect the rider's legs against the dragon's body. An intertwining and complex series of straps against the seat and backrest formed a harness, presumably to keep a rider from tumbling over the side during flight. There were numerous grooves and sheaths built into the saddle, seeming to serve as places to stow weapons and supplies—swords, knives, arrows, bows.

Quite a bit of detail for something they never actually used, Aulus mused, lifting his brow. Though I suppose if you believe in something as daft as dragons—and men who rode them once like horses— you would go to such an extreme to try and prove it.

A fluttering wink of lamplight off something metallic attracted his gaze, and Aulus turned, spying a large, intricately crafted gold statue of a dragon perched on a nearby stand of black granite.

“Hoah...” he whispered, his eyes widening as he stepped toward it. He marveled over the statue for a long, quiet moment, brushing his gloved fingertips gently against it. He looked around; other statues of dragons had been placed about the shrine, but these seemed to be made of some sort of enamel-glossed metal in bright shades of blue, red, green and black. There were no others wrought of gold, and the corner of his mouth hooked slightly. *If this statue is solid and genuine, it is worth a bloody damn fortune to the empire, he thought. And Yisun has kept it hoarded all this time...keeping it for herself.*

The dragon was depicted in the statue as it appeared in the murals, with wings that were no more than broad, webbed extensions of its forelimbs. The statue showed one reared on its powerful back haunches, its long, thick tail draped behind it, its wings outstretched. The yellow one in the mural had been shown with its wings hunkered toward the ground, taking the place of forelimbs to balance itself, and mimicking the peculiar—and in Aulus’ opinion—somewhat disturbing gait of some bat varieties.

Both the paintings and the statue showed the dragons with unusual heads. The crests of the pates rose out from their skulls, each tapering into an elongated protrusion. *Why? Aulus wondered. They look like they have bloody horns growing out of their heads.*

The granite platforms beneath each of the dragon statues had been carved, inscribed in Ulusian. Aulus could not read the Khahl’s unusual vocabulary of looping, intertwining characters; their runes hooked together into words written up and down, and not left to right as the Torachan practice. Like the Ulusian’s pagan religion and their clothing styles, this system of writing was supposed to have been replaced with Torachan runes and numerals—and, as with these, Yisun had thus far managed to avoid following imperial policy to suit her own stubborn desires.

But only thus far, Aulus thought with a frown. If I am going to be stuck in this rotted land with these damn, daft barbaric people, they will fall into line with the rest of the empire—whether Yisun wants it, wills it, wishes it or not. By my breath, the lot of them will.

“Starting with this bloody damn temple,” he muttered aloud, frowning.

“It is not a temple,” said a voice from behind him, and Aulus whirled, nearly slipping on his wet boot soles in his start. Yisun walked across the threshold of the shrine, trailed by two of her eunuch attendants. She was dressed in an immaculate white hide del that overlapped across her narrow bosom and fell to below her knees. The del and her hat were trimmed in broad bands of pristine white fur, and she wore white gutal adorned with gold-threaded embroidery.

The eunuchs stopped at either side of the doorway while their mistress continued on without them. They stood with their muscled arms tucked behind their backs, their hands folded against the small of their spine. Neither was as large as the hulking Megetu, who had left on the so-called hunting endeavor with Targutai, but they were brawny and imposing nonetheless.

Most of the Khahl men who served as the Kagan’s noncommissioned soldiers were eunuchs. They had become as such freely and of their own choosing, though why any men of such considerable size and strength would willingly and thoroughly part with those most tender portions that defined manhood remained an absolute mystery to Aulus. From what he understood of Khahl culture, becoming a eunuch was the only way a man of common birth could raise his status in life by entering into royal service, just as common woman could elevate herself socially by becoming a royal concubine. Somehow, the losses such sacrifices entailed did not seem not to temper in the slightest the eunuchs’ imposing appearance or brutish presence, and Aulus eyed them warily.

“This is a place to honor my people’s history, their legacy,” Yisun said. The cuffs of her sleeves fell below her palms, and were cuffed with white fur. She walked with her hands together at her midriff, and the cuffs came together as a muff against the cold.

Aulus recovered from his surprise and tried to force some aloof composure into his face. “Most would call a place meant for such honor a temple, my lady,” he said. “A temple that, by imperial mandate, is illegal.”

Yisun stopped before him, lifting her chin to meet his gaze. “Lord Tertius, when a woman among your people is bartered into marriage, does she abandon her own familial history for her vows?” she asked. “A Median slave does not cease to be Median simply because he is purchased by an Achaian master—just as you have not forgotten of mathematics even though you no longer serve the imperial treasury. Surely you can see that this is a place of reverence, not worship.”

Aulus looked at her for a long moment, and she did not avert her eyes from his. Something within her had changed since her son had left the palace. She had not softened toward Aulus, necessarily—and he doubted her granite-like heart was capable of such affable tenderness—but she seemed to be making diligent, daily effort to seek his company, and not simply to pester him. She had invited him to join her for meals, or to tour the palace and grounds. Her conversations had become more friendly and earnest. He suspected that without Targutai’s company, or that of Khidyr, her yeke idugan and Megetu—her closest counselors, whom she had sent out with the young Kagan—that Yisun had grown lonely.

As much as her newfound cordiality surprised him, Aulus had surprised himself all the more by empathizing with her. He knew how isolating it could be to be surrounded by nothing but slaves and soldiers; hardly the sort of company aristocratic, educated people such as he and Yisun were accustomed to.

“My clan’s tribe, the Manchu were once the sacred dragonriders,” Yisun said, interpreting his silence as concession on the matter of temples. She stepped alongside of him, close enough that her sleeve brushed against his, and she turned her head, looking up at him. “This statue is of Ag’iamon, the great dragonlord of legend. It is said Ag’iamon’s hide was as golden as this effigy. The yellow in the murals was a close as artists could blend when they were made.”

“How long ago were they painted?” Aulus asked her.

“Two hundred years ago, I believe,” Yisun said. “Targutai’s great-great-great grandfather, the Kagan Jurchadai Qoribuqa had this vault built as a place for his people to enjoy and remember. The dragon statues have been among the royal estate for at least one thousand years. It is believed that the Kagan Qulan Moghaichin

commissioned them for his wife, the Qatun Magsa, who was, like me, a daughter of the Manchu.”

She reached out, letting her fingertips, wrapped in soft, white hide gloves tap against the inscription carved beneath the golden dragon. “This is the name of the Kagan clan, Duuajin. The others list the names of the four clans of the Manchu tribe, one for each of the colors. The Ulaganjin represent the scarlet dragons; the Qaraqai, the black; the Koketani, the blue and my father’s clan, Nuguntu, the green.”

“And the saddle?” Aulus asked. “What does it represent, my lady?”

“This is truly a treasure to us.” Yisun walked past him toward the saddle display. She paused and glanced over her shoulder expectantly, and Aulus followed with a small, amused smirk. “My husband, Bujiragh discovered this in a sealed, hidden crypt beneath the palace several years before Targutai was born. Do you see these characters branded into the pommel crest? They are the dragonrider’s initials, his mark. Bujiragh believed this was a saddle fashioned for his ancestor, the Altan Kagan, Borjigidal Altantei for use upon his steed, Ag’iamon five thousand years ago.”

“Five thousand years?” Aulus asked dubiously, arching his brow.

“The ground here keeps very cool, even in the summer months,” Yisun said. “The cold would have helped preserve it. My husband also found it very carefully packed and stored; you can see how well the hide has remained intact and preserved after so many millennia. We do not think it was ever used, though it is difficult to know with certainty. Kagan Borjigidal was quite feeble in his later years, blind and weak, unable to ride Ag’iamon, or so our legends tell us. This saddle might have been a gift proffered by one of the Ulusian tribal noyan as a reverent token.”

“The murals seem to tell a story,” Aulus said, looking toward the nearest painting.

“Yes,” Yisun said. “It is the greatest of all Khahl lore, the legend of the first Khahl Kagan, Duua. He was Borjigidal’s favored son, the one he named heir to his empire. Duua’s deceitful half-brother, Dobun, poisoned Ag’iamon as revenge for Duua’s inheritance, and for this treachery, Ag’iamon summoned the dragons into the Khar mountains, calling them away from Ulus. The Oirat are made up of Dobun’s descendents, and the southern tribes that followed him, while my people, the Khahl, come from Duua and his northern allies.”

“This painting here,” Aulus said, and he turned, walking toward the far wall of the vault and the mural depicting the young Khahl man with seven marks upon his breast. “Is it Duua?”

“No,” Yisun replied, following him. “It represents a promise Ag’iamon left to Ulus upon his death. Despite Dobun’s betrayal, and the departure of the dragons as retribution for this offense, Ag’iamon promised that one day they would return to follow one of the rightful heirs of Ulus—one of Duua’s descendents.”

Aulus gazed up at the painting, marveling that the Khahl would cling so fervently and for so long to such a fanciful tale. Before the arrival of Torachans, the Taiga region of Ulus had been an impoverished state, the Khahl living little better than their Oirat neighbors in the Nuqut. He supposed in the face of such despair, any measure of hope, no matter how ridiculous—such as a legend of dragons, and the promise of their return—must have indeed been very precious to them.

“You are well-versed in your history, my lady,” he said, glancing at her. “My predecessor, Tiberius Crassus never made such mention to me.”

She met his gaze evenly. “Lord Crassus was an ignorant, bloated, pontificating buffoon,” she said, making Aulus laugh.

“And I am not?”

“No, Lord Tertius,” she said. “You are a man of intelligence and reason.”

He blinked at her, his laughter fading, caught somewhat off guard by the candid compliment.

“You do not believe in dragons,” she said, a statement of observation, not inquiry.

“I think it is quite obvious that such creatures occupy a special and sacred position within the mythos of your people,” Aulus said.

“But you do not believe in them.”

“I do not believe the gigantic creatures depicted in these murals or statues flew around the skies of the Taiga ages ago, no, my lady,” Aulus replied. “I think it likely your ancestors observed large mountain vultures soaring from the Khar foothills and misjudged their species and sizes from a distance, thus giving rise to the mythopoeia of dragons.”

Yisun nodded once. If his words offended her, as per usual, it was not reflected in her face.

“I am not one much for legends, my lady,” Aulus said. “I am the sort of man who holds faith in very little, except for those things I can lay my hands against, that I can feel and know with certainty are real. But I think I can appreciate the sort of faith this lore has instilled among your people. It seems it has not been without some purpose or benefit to the Khahl.”

Yisun nodded again. She looked up at the mural for a long moment, and then startled Aulus by taking him by the hand, her small, slender fingers sliding between his own. “I would like to show you something, Lord Tertius.”

Her touch, the pressure of her hand against his stoked something within the pit of Aulus’ belly. It was not the first time he had noticed that Yisun was beautiful, or that the air around her seemed sweet and fragrant, as though she anointed herself daily with baths and oils infused with flower petals. He would have been lying if he had said that even in his earliest days in Kharhorin, even at his most miserable and despondent moments, he had not imagined what it might be like to lay with her—because no matter how aloof or manipulative Yisun might be, and no matter how little he might trust her, Yisun’s company was undoubtedly preferable to that of a cold, lonely chamber, or an oversized hound for a bedmate.

He was certain that Yisun was aware of the flustering effect her proximity and touch had on him, and he was embarrassed and aggravated. The corner of her mouth lifted briefly, slightly and he nearly collapsed on the floor.

I will be damned, he thought, astounded. *Yisun Goyaljin just smiled at me.*

She led him by the hand toward the mural along the far wall, and he followed without protest. He wondered what she had in mind for him, and for a moment, entertained the notion that she meant to draw him someplace privately, where she would then proceed to make love to him. It was an idea that left him shivering, not with cold this time, but with anticipation.

He watched her reach up, straining onto the toes of her guta to place her palm against a margin of the painted stone, the place on the picture where the young man’s chest had been painted, the seven marks that framed his heart. Yisun pushed here, and

a small square of rock slid back into a recessed hollow in the wall. There was a faint, grinding sound of stone scraping against stone and Aulus gasped quietly, startled as a hidden door suddenly opened in the wall before them. He could see soft golden light fluttering along the walls beyond the threshold, and realized it was a stairwell leading downward, a stairwell lined with small lamps along the walls for illumination.

“What is this?” he asked and again, visions of Yisun leading him to some secret alcove and then straddling him danced through his head.

“Something you can place your hands against,” Yisun said. “So that you may know with certainty it is real.” She tugged against his hand, leading him in step with her as she began to descend the stairs. He followed her down into a small chamber hewn into the earth beneath the shrine’s foundation. The room was lined with more lamps and candles, and what it contained left Aulus staggering, his voice and breath knotted together in his throat, any thoughts of lovemaking obliterated from his mind and groin.

A dragon’s skull rested in the center of the chamber atop a large stone block. The bone was yellowed with age, but there was no mistaking its origin. The skull cap crested into the elongated projection Aulus had seen in the statuary and paintings above. The nasal hollows were deep troughs carved along the length of the snout, the eye sockets angled so that the eyes they had once cradled within their confines would have been capable of a wide arc of sight, nearly panoramic. The entire skull was probably three feet wide and five feet in length; ten if one counted the length of the crest horn in their calculations.

“No other Torachan has ever stepped foot within these walls,” Yisun said, letting her hand slip away from his as she walked toward the center of the chamber. “This is the skull of Ag’iamon, the great dragonlord himself.”

Her words registered only dimly within Aulus’ stunned mind; his gaze had wandered away from Yisun, away from the head and toward the back wall. He uttered a soft, fluttering sound and stumbled in place, his eyes flown wide with shock.

Behind the skull, posed along the far wall of the chamber was a dragon. It was surely twenty feet long, if not more, nearly filling the entire width of the wall. It stood twice as tall as Aulus, and lamp light played in dancing glow and shadows against the

contours of its haunches, the graceful measure of its throat, the underside of its delicate, outstretched wings.

It was dead. The Khahl had obviously practiced keen taxidermy skills in the transferal of the dragon's fragile hide onto a wooden rack. It had likely been stuffed with dried grasses and muslin treated with marrow and acidic berry juices to keep it well preserved. Its flesh looked to have a pebbled texture along its body, and smooth as flawless leather along the wings. It was torn and tattered here in places with obvious signs of past decay, and he could see that the entire hide had been treated with a similar preservative as the stuffing likely was; the blue flesh had nearly a purple cast to it.

"It was a young one," Yisun said, something akin to sorrow in her voice as she turned her eyes to the dragon. "Not fully grown yet. It died during the great migration, when Ag'iamon called them from us. It was lost among the mountain peaks for thousands of years, until a glacier thawed and delivered it down from the slopes."

Aulus blinked at her, realizing. *This is the dragon*, he thought. *The one the imperial soldiers claimed to have seen in Lydia—the one that had vanished when the empire went to claim it, bring it back to Cneas. I will be damned...!*

"You stole it," he whispered. "You stole it from the Khar mountains in Lydia—from the empire."

"No, Lord Tertius," Yisun told him. "The empire meant to steal it from us. I merely had it returned to its rightful home here in Kharhorin. I brought it back where it belongs."

"You know I will have to tell the empire about this," Aulus said to Yisun. He had wandered about the chamber for nearly fifteen minutes, staring at both the dragon and the skull in breathless astonishment. He had touched them, pulling off his gloves and running his hands against the fragile hide and ancient bone in state of dazed and childlike wonder. He stood now beneath the canopy of the cerulean dragon's outstretched left wing and he raised his eyes to the ceiling, marveling over the delicate construction of the creature's elongated, jointed phalanges.

“I have brought you here, shown these to you for your benefit, not the empire’s,” Yisun said. She was behind him, near the granite pedestal upon which Ag’iamon’s skull rested, and he turned to her.

“I cannot keep this from them,” Aulus said. “I do not know how you have managed to all of this time, but I cannot, my lady. They will want these things brought to the university in Cneas. There are scholars there, historians who will want to examine them, document them.”

“Do you always provide the empire with what they want?” she asked.

Aulus frowned at her. “That is my job, my lady,” he said. “It is why I have been sent here.”

“And what about what you want?”

“What I want is to do my job,” he said. “And to do it well, according to imperial mandate and decree. This building, shrine—whatever you may call it, my lady—is a temple by the empire’s definition. A pagan site, and these artifacts, this collection, these remains are all imperial property. The empire’s, my lady, not the Khahl’s any longer—and not yours.”

“You would take them from us?” Yisun asked.

“I would, yes, my lady,” he replied. “And I will.”

He waited for her wrath, her fire and when it did not come, when she continued to regard him with a calm impassivity, Aulus’ frown deepened.

“It is admirable of you, my Lord Tertius, to place your own desires beneath those of your empire,” Yisun said. “Surely you have known great reward for such loyal service and sacrifice.”

Aulus nearly guffawed aloud. *Hoah, yes, certainly*, he thought. *Great reward indeed—being sent to the bloody farthest corner of the realm and left to freeze to death in this permafrost wasteland.*

“If you would inform the imperial Senate of this place, then certainly this is your duty,” she said, and she turned away from him, walking toward the stairs. She folded her hands together beneath the muff of her fur-trimmed sleeves, her boot soles whispering softly against the floor. “I understand the burden of such responsibility. I envy your ability to disregard your own potential for personal power and gains.”

She started up the steps, moving slowly, without turning even to glance over her shoulder as she spoke. Aulus blinked at her, raising his brow sharply.

You are daft, woman. The only thing I might gain in this forsaken tundra is a bloody lung infection. “Why did you bring me here?” he asked, giving her pause.

“Because I wanted you to see the artifacts.” She turned to him. “You are unhappy. I do not need the counsel of my shamans to see this. You had hoped for a more noble appointment from the empire than this, something of more esteem and authority, a position of prestige to suit your skills and ambitions. You do not understand us, and you underestimate my people—and yourself. I had hoped by sharing some of our most treasured history with you, you might realize that we are not so different. We all serve the same masters—and we all want the same things.”

“And what do ‘we’ want, my Lady Yisun?”

The corner of her mouth lifted again. “Power, Lord Tertius,” she said.

“You want power that belongs to the empire, power that is not yours to hold any longer.”

“When a man and woman wed, the man becomes her master in word and vow, his will supposedly her own. A wife cannot very well overpower her husband, whose size and strength best hers, but a woman’s whispered word, spoken in earnest counsel can sway his opinion more than any weapon or fist. A tender nuzzle or wanton glance can affect his mood, his actions. Power, Lord Tertius, does not necessarily lie in who is the strongest—but in who is the smartest, and most patient.”

“You think you are smarter than me,” he said, frowning. “That if you wait long enough, like Crassus, I will be gone. You want to sway me in the meantime, lull me with your cordial efforts—just as you did Crassus—and then you can begin anew with the next consul the empire sends in my place.”

“I do not think that at all, my lord,” Yisun said, meeting his gaze. “As I said, we are not so different—each of us dutiful spouses in service to a mutual master, the empire. Lord Crassus was little more than an imperial whore, but you, Lord Tertius are smart enough, patient enough that you could use your position here, your influence with the empire to your own interests and advantage—while seeming to serve theirs. As you noted, I have accomplished this myself up until your arrival. I brought you here, showed

you these sacred artifacts as a gesture of good will, because I believe that together, you and I can bring great benefits to us both...and all in seeming service to the empire.”

“The only benefits I will find here are those that come from doing my duty,” he told her.

“Your duty has placed you in a unique position,” she said. “One I do not think you—or the empire—have fully realized or appreciated yet. Lord Crassus squandered the potential of his appointment here in Ulu. I had hoped to expect more from you. Perhaps I was mistaken.”

She turned and started up the stairs again. “Do what you must, Lord Tertius. I am sure the Senate will see you know equal and just reward for your efforts here in Ulu, as they did for those in Serdica.”

He stared after her, infuriated. He jerked his gloves on, shoving his hands deep into the wool-lined hide, his brows furrowed, his mouth turned in a frown. He did not know what incensed him more—her audacity, her words, or the fact that the bloody damn bitch was right.

For thirteen years, I have done whatever the empire has asked of me, he thought, scowling. Since I was eighteen years old, I have abided by their rules and edicts—followed and enforced their laws. My father was a dispensator for the imperial Diocetes, and his father before him. Three generations of loyal service, and here is my reward—not an appointment to Cneas, not a commission to the position of dispensator, but this. Bloody rotted Ulu in the heart of absolutely nothing.

He looked up at the cerulean dragon. He knew what would happen if he sent word to the Senate about this discovery. For about a month, Kharhorin would be crawling with imperial scholars and soldiers, all of them scurrying about, collecting the artifacts, packing them with deliberate care and sending them west to the sea for shipment to Cneas. All manner of officials in his city, and Aulus knew none of them would defer to him, seek his counsel, opinion or advice—likely not even ask his bloody damn name.

And then, when they have taken it all, they will leave, he thought. They will leave me here, no better off than I am at this very moment. I might get a letter of commendation from the Senate, if I am lucky, a nice note to say: ‘Thank you, Consul

Tertius, for your continued loyalty to the empire. We knew we could depend on you to see order instilled. By means of reward for such dependable, unwavering service, we are next sending you into Galjin, along the coast of the Surensu Sea, and the Bara'Qadan mountain range. If you thought you were cold and miserable in Ulus—hoah, lad, wait until you step foot in Galjin!

Aulus hurried after Yisun, springing up the steps two per stride. He found the Qatun'Eke waiting for him patiently in the shrine, her hands still tucked within her muff, her face impassive. He stared at her for a moment, his breath huffing from his sprint.

"I...I cannot betray the empire," he said to her. "What you are asking of me is treason."

"It is not," Yisun said. "You and the empire can share in many mutual benefits, and there are plenty to be found as yours alone that bring no harm to the empire, and no compromise in their deserved trust in you. You have not yet even begun to realize, much less enjoy the privileges your position as tribunicia potestate can award you here in Ulus."

"Privileges?" Aulus asked, bewildered. "What manner of privileges?"

"Come with me," Yisun said, and she began to walk toward the threshold of the shrine. "I will introduce you to them."

Khidyr Shriagal stood in the darkened confines of a narrow, hidden corridor between the walls of the palace. She leaned forward, peering through a small hole looking into the chamber on the other side. For some time, she had been listening to soft sounds emanating from within, a stirring, pleasant melody of moans and gasps, breathless pleas and rustling bedclothes. Now she could observe the source of the noises—Aulus Tertius, the handsome young tribunicia potestate from Torach was making the acquaintance of the Kagan's personal concubines. Where Targutai was still boy enough to be disinterested in the women's wiles and efforts, Aulus was not—and he was enjoying himself immensely in this new found privilege, to judge by the looks and sounds of things.

Aulus had been pleased and surprised when Yisun had offered the concubines to him upon their return from the shrine. "I had selected these in the hopes my Kagan

might satiate some of his blossoming curiosities in their company,” Yisun had told him as the seven young women had come to stand before him in a row. Each one bore a crimson tattoo upon their faces, marking them as slaves of the Kagan, each more beautiful and voluptuous than the last. “Targutai has proven yet more concerned with childish interests than any such desires. If you would like them...if they would please you, Lord Tertius, I would give them to you.”

“Give them to me?” he asked, startled, blinking at Yisun. “But they are royal concubines. Surely they are valuable to you.”

“Yes.” Yisun nodded. “Ten thousand of your Torachan dorotus apiece. But as I told you, there are privileges you have yet to realize—privileges your position awards to you exclusively. Here is one, my lord. I will give them to you.”

Another privilege she had introduced Aulus to had been serekuem. In the stone block beneath Ag’iamon’s skull, the Khahl had stored the remnants of his bones, those that had been too large or heavy for scavengers to carry away from the mountainside millennia ago. Serekuem was a finely powdered blend of ground fragments of the dragonlord’s bones and a derivative gleaned from the unripened fruits of the cayan’checheg plant. For ages, serekuem had been used among the Khahl nobility as an enhancer of natural awareness and vigor. Aulus had been wary when presented with a small, hollowed branch of the beregkel plant and a small plate upon which Khidyr had arranged a narrow line of the powdered mixture.

“It awakens your mind,” Yisun had offered him in gentle reassurance. “Heightens your senses, makes your body and spirits sing in harmony. Our most noble noyan and lords have used it for thousands of years. You will see.”

Aulus had been reluctant, but he had sniffed some of the powder through the hollow shaft of beregkel. He had sat back from the plate, blinking as his eyes watered, rubbing his fingertips against his nose and gasping sharply. “Hoah...” he had whispered, shaking his head slightly.

Khidyr watched one of the concubines moving slowly astride Aulus in the bed. The serekuem had taken almost immediate, enrapturing effect upon the consul, and had not loosened its hold upon his mind for nearly two hours now. The concubines had been trained since childhood in the countless methods of drawing pleasure from every

measure of a man's form, and they took turns with Aulus, showing him no restraint or mercy. He did not stand a chance against them.

He lay on his back in the bed, cradling the concubine's hips between his hands as she undulated against him, quickening her steady pace, and he tilted back his chin, moaning in abject delight. Khidyr smiled softly to herself, pleased with her efforts.

"I can deal with Aulus Tertius," she had told Yisun two weeks earlier. "I know his weaknesses, his softness. Do not worry. He will be no trouble to us."

Khidyr turned, moving quietly along the corridor, making her way back to the hidden entrance in the Qatun'Eke's chamber. She ducked inside the room, easing the hinged panel in the wall closed once more with her hip, and then she went and sat on an upholstered stool before the tended fire.

She had her own chamber at the palace, but seldom stayed there. She had come with Yisun to Kharhorin from their home among the Manchu tribe nearly two decades earlier, and she had been Yisun's closest advisor—and her lover—ever since. Khidyr was five years older than the queen; Yisun had always found a tender hand and compassionate ear in the yeke idugan. She had first come to Khidyr's bed as a young bride, on the first occasion that Bujiragh had beaten her in a drunken rage. Yisun had wept, battered and bleeding, frightened and aghast, and Khidyr had wept with her, enfolding her in her arms, kissing her softly until Yisun's tears had waned, until her tremulous voice had yielded to soft, curious whimpers against the tip of Khidyr's tongue.

The two women had grown to know each other's bodies as intimately and with as much fond familiarity as their own over the years. It would only be logical, then, Khidyr had told Yisun, that they should follow her plan to see the queen accompany Targutai and the Minghan to the Khar mountains.

"Targutai is your son," Khidyr had said, cradling Yisun's cheek against her palm. "He is yet too young to face such a journey on his own, even with Megetu and the Minghan. He will need you, Yisun. You are his strength, his guidance. You always have been. You always will be."

Yisun had nodded, her dark eyes glistening with tears. The women showed emotions freely and unashamed with one another, releasing themselves from the strict confines of their traditional Khahl upbringing and sharing with one another such rare

and fleeting moments of vulnerability. “I do not know what to do,” Yisun whispered, turning her face against Khidyr’s hand. “I cannot leave Aulus Tertius here alone. I do not trust him.”

Khidyr did not trust the consul either, but she knew what she needed to do to control him. He was not as stupid or pliable as Tiberius Crassus had been, but Aulus remained lonely for his home and resentful of his purpose in an unfamiliar place. Khidyr had long since recognized that he could be manipulated by these emotions, and the relentless sway of his own young form and desires as any other man.

“I will deal with Lord Tertius,” Khidyr had told Yisun.

There had been only one way Yisun could accompany Targutai to the west without arousing Aulus’ suspicions. He had to believe she had not left at all, that she remained in Kharhorin at the palace. Khidyr had known how to achieve this seeming impossibility; an ancient and dangerous ritual called *soliqu*, which meant *exchange*.

Ulusians believed that people possessed three souls: the *sun*, that animated the body; the *ami*, that animated the mind and the *suld*, or shared ancestral souls. It was possible for shamans to exchange *ami* souls between people; their bodies would remain unaffected with individual *sun*s in place to ensure life in form and limbs, but in essence, their minds would be traded. It was a difficult task, attempted by only the most powerful of shamans and only on very rare occasion in history. It was a tedious, lengthy procedure, because the exchange of *amis* could be well perceived as a violation of the universal balance—the *Tegsh*—and the *Tengri* and *Umai*, the womb goddess had to be offered numerous sacrifices and gifts in order to convince them otherwise. When released from the physical forms to which they had been assigned by *Umai*, *ami* souls assumed death had come, and they sought to return to the spirit tree to await rebirth. It took great skill and power—and often numerous shamans with very powerful *utha* *sulds*—to persuade the *amis* to travel instead into another form, and to remain earthbound.

It had required all of the twelve shamans under Khidyr to perform the ritual of *soliqu*. It had taken long hours of offerings and sacrifice, chanting and drum-beating, but at last, Khidyr had roused from a state of deep entrancement to find herself inside of

Yisun's body. She had opened her eyes and blinked at the Qatun'Eke, who now regarded her, slightly dazed and sleepy, from Khidyr's form.

"It...it worked," Yisun had whispered. Her fingers had trembled as she reached up, touching her new face—Khidyr's face—with a mixture of curiosity and wonder. She had met Khidyr's eyes—her own eyes—and smiled. "It worked."

"Tengeriin boshig," Khidyr had said, Yisun's voice fluttering from her lips. *Tengri's will.*

Yisun had left with Megetu, Targutai and the Minghan for the Chagan Sea with Aulus Tertius none the wiser for their ruse. Only Megetu knew that it was not Khidyr who rode with them for the west; Yisun had insisted the secret be kept from Targutai.

"This is the moment of his destiny," she had said, as she stood before a mirror, marveling over Khidyr's face and form reflected in the glass. "He must believe he accomplishes this on his own. He will assume the full responsibilities of Kagan when he returns with the dragons. He must have this experience to teach him well what will be needed of him, if he is to reclaim Duua's empire."

Yisun and Khidyr's ami souls had been bound within their new respective forms by simple ongons they each wore about their necks. So long as the talismans remained in place, the exchange would hold fast. Should something happen, if one of them should remove or lose their ongon, the results would be devastating to them both. With no shamans likely to be present to prevent the amis from fleeing to the spirit tree, as was their nature, both women would die. It had been a risk both Khidyr and Yisun had been willing to take.

Khidyr had also insured that the journeys of the two jaguns of Minghan westward would go unnoticed by the Oirat. Like the Khahl, the Oirat had shamans of their own, and Khidyr knew that Yeb Oyugundei in particular—Aigiarn's yeke shaman, and likely the man with the most powerful hiimori in the entire Bith—would sense their approach and intent unless she used rituals and magic to keep hidden from him. Again, Khidyr had summoned her twelve shamans to her, and together they had uttered powerful incantations, spells that would keep the Khahl movement hidden and secreted from even Yeb's awareness.

Khidyr had given each member of the Minghan jaguns a specially anointed raven's feather to wear about their necks. The feathers were a sort of spiritual disguise; Yeb would be able to sense the soldiers, but his utha suld would be confused by them, and in his mind, Yeb would see only crowds of ravens, not men.

"He will be suspicious," Khidyr had told Megetu, as she slipped a slender cord of sinew to which the feather had been fastened about the eunuch's broad neck. "He is too strong. I cannot keep him from us. But I can keep him from seeing all, and these will block our progress from him."

Khidyr closed her eyes, luxuriating in the warmth of the fire against her face. *Everything is going just as we devised, Yisun*, she thought, letting Yisun's mouth unfurl in a soft smile.

Because their amis and suni souls were now intertwined, the two women shared a rapport between their minds that traversed any distance between them. Khidyr's smile widened as she sensed Yisun's presence within her, like a sunbeam breaking through a heavy line of grey, snow-swollen clouds.

What of Aulus Tertius? Yisun asked.

Khidyr thought of the young consul, his mind reeling from serekuem, his body writhing with pleasure. *I do not think he will trouble us any longer.*

When Yisun smiled hundreds of miles away, unseen to Khidyr's eyes, she could feel it within her mind. *It is for the good of the kingdom*, Yisun said. *And the Khahl.*

Tengeriin boshig, Khidyr thought in agreement. *Tengri's will.*

Chapter Seven

Targutai stood poised and motionless on a small outcropping of cragged rocks jutting out into the swift current of a broad, shallow stream. He kept his eyes on the water, his breath nearly still in his throat as he watched large, rust-colored fish beneath him fluttering their fins and wagging their tails as they struggled to defy the current and swim upstream. They were alqacha, and they migrated throughout the winter months to reach the lakes of the Khar mountain foothills where they would spawn in the springtime.

He held a long spear raised in his right hand. The weapon was connected to his body by a length of rope that was fettered about the end of the spear shaft and to his wrist. There was snow on the ground here, and ice along the rocks, but Targutai's guta soles had been carved with deep grooves to allow purchase along even the most treacherous of surfaces. The young Kagan looked down at the alqacha, confident in his footing and aim. When at last, one of the fish ventured close to his perch, his arm shot forward, his fingers loosening their deliberate grip against the shaft. The stone spearhead pierced the surface of the water, skewering through the alqacha's skull. Targutai jerked his arm back; as the rope snapped obediently taut, he caught the shaft against his hand, drawing both spear and fish from the water.

He looked toward Megetu, who stood nearby, observing the boy. Targutai grasped the spear in his hand, showing off the fish that still thrashed helplessly, impaled. He grinned broadly at the eunuch, and Megetu smiled back at him, nodding once in silent approval.

They had reached the northern edge of the Nuqut region, near Qoyina Bay, one of a pair of deep inland harbors called the Forks of Sube, off of the Chagan Sea. They were in the foothills of the Khar mountain range now, a landscape divided among pine forests and rock-encrusted slopes, rived with streams and rivers that carved paths eastward out of the mountain peaks. This was the outermost edge of Oirat territory, north of Maral Lake in western Ulus. Yisun's spies had reported that one of the Oirat

tribes, the Uru'ut had set up their winter aysil in this area, and it was from here that Temuchin Arightei had left by boat to claim the golden falcon.

The Khahl had found the Uru'ut aysil. The two hundred Minghan soldiers had set up camp of their own several miles east of the Oirat, tucking themselves in the foothills for shelter. The Uru'ut had positioned their little settlement along the waterfront, because they were a seafaring and fishing tribe. They were also fairly stupid, in Targutai's opinion. It was a long and treacherous journey, crossing through the foothills to reach the harbor from the steppes of Ulus, and the Uru'ut were apparently confident that no one would discover them here. The Khahl had been near enough to attack them at their leisure for a full day now, and the Uru'ut suspected nothing of their presence.

Targutai wrenched the fish from the end of his spear. He tossed it into the tall, dried grass along the water's edge and hopped nimbly down from his perch, walking toward Megetu. They were awaiting a report from his mother's spies among the Uru'ut, and he had been fishing because he was bored, not hungry. There was precious little to do while they waited save keep a cautious eye on the Oirat—who did nothing apparently of any interest or importance—or find quiet, inconspicuous ways of amusing themselves.

"That was a good one, was it not, Megetu?" Targutai asked, looking up at the eunuch. Megetu was an enormous, hulking man, uncharacteristically tall for an Ulusian, and built like the outer hull of a stone fortress. He did not speak much; because of his castration, he had a high-pitched voice that seemed grossly out-of-place issuing forth from his large frame, and he was ashamed of it. When Targutai had been a small child, many afternoons had been spent playing with the big man, riding aloft on his shoulders or tucked against Megetu's square hip like a sack of grain. Targutai had never known his own father, and over the years, Megetu had come to take Bujiragh's place in many ways.

Megetu nodded and smiled at him again, his broad, imposing face growing gentle as he brushed his fingertips fondly against Targutai's cheek. He clapped his large palm against the boy's shoulder and the two walked together through the snow, back to their camp.

“It is a shame we cannot start a fire,” Targutai lamented, hunching his shoulders in reluctant resignation. “I might have roasted the meat for supper. You could have used the innards to make a stew for yourself.”

Even a small cooking fire might have created enough smoke to be seen from the Uru’ut village below. The Khahl were taking no chances. Targutai understood this, but still sulked. “It is cold,” he said, his brows narrowing. He sniffled slightly, wriggling his nose. “A hot supper would be nice.”

Megetu nodded in agreement. He reached out, pausing long enough to tug against the fleece lined flap that hung down from the brim of Targutai’s leather cap and tied beneath his chin to keep the back of his head and neck, along with his ears warm. Targutai frowned, flapping his hands at Megetu to shoo him.

“Stop it,” he said, glowering, shaming Megetu into submission. “I am not a child. The others will see. Leave me alone.”

As they drew near to the camp, Targutai could see the slender, slight figure of Khidyr Shriagal, his mother’s yeke idugan walking briskly toward them.

“My Kagan,” Khidyr said, her long braid slapping back and forth against her hips as she approached. She wore a furlined, saffron-colored jifu to mark her a shaman, but otherwise was dressed like the Minghan soldiers, with panels of thick, mail-lined leather over her shoulders and chest. Targutai thought he could still see the faint, jostling motion of her bosom beneath the heavy hide armor. He had never been very interested in women—or bosoms—before, and was somewhat disconcerted that lately such things seemed to attract his attention and gaze without his intention. The Oirat girl, Noyon had been the same way. He had genuinely liked her as someone to play with; he had kissed her one day, and from there, his body had seemed to set its own course of action. He had not minded the experience, but remained bewildered and troubled by it nonetheless.

He had long thought Khidyr was beautiful; she had an oval-shaped face with a tapered chin, large eyes and a nose that was longer and more slender than most Ulusians. She had a wide, full mouth that Targutai found nearly mesmerizing when she spoke. Several months ago, right after Yisun had presented him with concubines, Targutai had told his mother in bashful confession that he thought Khidyr was far more

lovely than any of the women Yisun had found, and that he might fancy to marry her someday. Yisun had blinked as though startled and then hugged him, laughing until tears streamed down her cheeks; a reaction Targutai still did not quite understand.

“The spies have come, my Kagan,” Khidyr said, lowering her gaze respectfully toward the toes of her gutal. “Bahadur Neikun seeks your counsel, and yours, bahadur Megetu.”

“Tell them I said to wait,” Targutai said. He turned to Megetu. “We will go to my maikhan and you will help me put on my imperial chaofu and armor. The Kagan will not offer counsel dressed like a foot-soldier. I should look splendid for such occasion.”

Megetu nodded his chin in polite deference to his young liege.

“Of course, my Kagan,” Khidyr said, keeping her eyes on the ground.

Targutai and Megetu went to the imperial maikhan, ducking through the furlined flap of hide marking the entrance to the small, lightweight tent. Targutai loosened the ties of his hat beneath his chin and pulled it off while Megetu set to work unfastening the thick leather panels suspended across his torso and back.

Even though Megetu and the other Minghan leader, Neikun were there, along with Khidyr to offer Targutai counsel, this was really the first occasion he had ever known where he would make any and all final decisions, when he would choose courses of action for the Khahl soldiers to follow. He was accustomed to having Yisun close at hand to help him, and as he shrugged his way out of his bufu, Targutai found himself both anxious about his mother’s absence, and eager all at the same time.

He glanced down at his bare chest, shivering in the cold. He brushed his fingertips against the raised marks of the Dologhon upon his breast, and smiled slightly. *I am the Negh, he told himself. I am more than the Kagan. I am the lord of dragons and men. I can make decisions without Mother. I do not need her. I am not a child anymore. I am a man now.*

He slipped his fingers about the loop of cord Khidyr had given him and lowered his head, meaning to pull the necklace off. It was nothing but a crow’s feather fastened to some sinew; the idugan had given one to each and every one in the Minghan jaguns. She had told them not to take them off, but Targutai was not really thinking about her instructions. He was thinking about how marvelous he would look in his bright scarlet

vestments, his gold-trimmed leather armor, his magnificent helm crowned with a spray of crimson-dyed horsehair. He jumped with start as Megetu hooked his fingers against his wrist, staying him before he removed the feather necklace.

“Let go of me,” Targutai snapped with a frown, shrugging away from Megetu’s grasp. “What is wrong with you?”

“You cannot take it off,” Megetu told him, his voice soft and nearly sweet in its soprano timbre. Because he spoke so little, Megetu had never grown particularly familiar or articulate in the Torachan common tongue. When he did speak it, the language seemed difficult for him, as though he had to concentrate very hard to articulate his words correctly. “Khidyr said so.”

“I am the Kagan,” Targutai said, lifting his chin at a defiant angle. “I can do whatever I want. It itches me and I am taking it off.”

He reached for the necklace again, and Megetu caught him gently by the hands.

“They will see you,” Megetu said. “With it, they see only birds. Do not.”

Targutai jerked his hands away, his frown deepening. He knew who *they* were—the Oirat, and their yeke shaman, Yeb Oyugundei. Yeb was the one who had tricked the Tengri, who had branded Temuchin Arightei’s breast with mark of the Negh to fool the divine spirits. Yeb was the reason Temuchin was on a boat at that very moment, bringing Targutai’s golden falcon from the west to lead him to Targutai’s dragons.

“I do not care,” he said to Megetu. “Let Yeb Oyugundei see me. I am unafraid of him. I will skewer him with my scimitar, just like I will Temuchin.”

“Please do not,” Megetu said, raising his brows, his expression unhappy and pleading.

Targutai sighed heavily. “They see a hen when they see you through the hiimori.” He snatched his heavily lined silk jifu and chaofu from the eunuch’s hands. “They hear a hen squeaking and clucking whenever you wag your tongue. They will think we have sent concubines, not Minghan to stop them.”

Megetu lowered his face toward the ground as Targutai struggled into his jifu, and then fought to pull the surcoat overtop. After a frustrated, futile moment, Targutai turned to the eunuch, flapping his sleeves helplessly. “It is too small.”

Megetu helped adjust the panels of fabric against his shoulders, as Targutai poked his hands out of the sleeve cuffs. Megetu knelt, fastening the gilded gold buttons along Targutai's left shoulder. The chaogu was adorned with elaborate embroidery depicting imperial symbols such as dragons, mountains, the sun and moon. Megetu did not speak again, or meet Targutai's eyes as he worked, and Targutai felt ashamed, knowing he had hurt Megetu's feelings.

"I am sorry, Megetu," he whispered, drawing the man's gaze. "I did not mean it."

Megetu cupped his palm against Targutai's cheek, brushing his hair back toward his temple. He smiled gently at the boy. "I know."

"I like it when you talk," Targutai said, making Megetu smile all the more.

"You talk better," he said, and Targutai laughed.

Once Targutai was dressed in his resplendent vestments, his embroidered surcoat with matching, tapestry-woven formal collar, and his helmet, a gold-plated steel dome with a long sheaf of stained horsehair spouting from the pate, he and Megetu walked together to Neikun's maikhan.

When Targutai entered the tent, Khidyr and the Minghan officers in attendance rose to their feet, bowing their heads before him respectfully, pleasing and delighting him. Two of the soldiers—Ulagan and Bugiec—had been serving as spies among the Uru'ut, and appeared in the drab, furlined delds and khurims of the Oirat. With them was the Oirat they had forced into infiltration for them, a man named Jebe. Jebe was considered one of the leaders of the Uru'ut, a counselor to the tribal noyan. His position made him privy to all sorts of information about the Oirat's activities. His wife and children were imprisoned in Kharhorin, and their survival had been bartered in exchange for Jebe's cooperation with the Khahl. Jebe sat before them now, quaking like a rabbit caught in a den filled with wolves. At the sight of Targutai in the magnificent adornments of the imperial Kagan, his eyes grew wide and bright with fear and intimidation.

They sat in a circle on the floor, with Khidyr to Targutai's left and Megetu to his right. Targutai nodded sharply toward Ulagan and Bugiec and the two delivered their report for his consideration.

Two Uru'ut longboats had set off from shore almost an hour ago, each filled with supplies and armed Uru'ut men dressed in the battle garb of the Oirat. Another group had left by land, riding bergelmir and heading southwest into the Khar Mountains. Nearly eighty Uru'ut warriors in all had left the aysil, and none had returned.

"Forty by boat and forty by land, my Kagan," Ulagan said, his expression grim. "The ones by boat have gone to meet Aigiarn Chinuajin and the false one in at Tolui Bay. The Uru'ut received word by falcon this morning. The Oirat mean to go from there, to leave from the Bay and into the mountains. The others will meet them once they have started into the slopes."

"Where are they going at Tolui Bay?" Targutai asked. "Where are the riders meeting them in the mountains?"

Ulagan looked at the Uru'ut man, Jebe. When Jebe offered no immediate reply, Ulagan shoved his elbow sharply, forcefully between the man's shoulder blades. "You will answer your Kagan."

Jebe blinked at Targutai. It was an amazing and remarkable thing, Targutai had discovered, to have someone be afraid of you. Had he been just another boy in Jebe's aysil, he might have earned a doting smile or fleeting glance from the man. But he was the Kagan, and Jebe was terrified of him. He stared at Targutai with enormous eyes, glossy in the lamp light with sudden tears.

"By boat to the mouth of the Toda River and from there, down the Urlug," he said quietly, his voice tremulous. "By...by land to the Harw River, to wait for them."

"How do they know to go there?" Targutai asked him. "Tolui Bay is enormous—hundreds of miles of shoreline. How can they be certain the path to the lair starts there? How do they already know the course will take them to the Harw?"

"They have a map," Jebe said.

"They cannot read their map." Targutai closed his hands into fists as he leaned toward the Oirat. "It is worthless to them. They have the falcon—my damn falcon—and they do not need their map."

Jebe cringed at Targutai's sudden, harsh voice. "Aigiarn Chinuajin...she sent word to noyan Juchin this morning," he said, referring to the Uru'ut leader. "That is the place she said to meet them—the Toda River—and that they would be following the

Urlug southeast to the Harw. Aigiarn Chinuajin said they had found the falcon Ag'iamon promised, but it was not a bird at all. It was a riddle.”

“A riddle?” Targutai asked, raising his brow. Khidyr and Megetu exchanged sudden, startled glances.

Jebe nodded his head. “*Falcon* is a name, she said. The name of a man from the west, a place across the sea called Tiralainn. There are baga’han there—descendents of the Abhacan. The man named *falcon* knows of them, and he...he can speak their language. He can read their map.”

“A man?” Targutai said. He blinked between Khidyr and Megetu, visibly bewildered.

“A man with golden hair,” Jebe said.

“A golden falcon from the west to lead the way,” Khidyr murmured.

Targutai turned to her, stricken. “If they can read the map, they know where the lair is.”

“They know the way, and they will be confident now,” Khidyr said. “They will guide themselves instead of being led, and they will move faster.”

Targutai sprang to his feet, his hands balled, his brows furrowed. “Bugu Khidyr is right. We have to go—now—to Tolui Bay, to the Toda River.”

“My Kagan, it is at least a seven-day journey through the mountains to reach that portion of the bay’s shores,” Neikun protested.

“It is only two days by boat, would you not say, Ulagan?” Khidyr asked, looking toward the Minghan spy.

“We do not have any boats, idugan Khidyr,” Neikun said.

Targutai whirled toward him, his eyes flashing. “But they have boats aplenty,” he snapped, thrusting his finger at Jebe, making the Oirat man cower. “Stop offering excuses, Neikun, when bugu Khidyr gives us ready answers. We need boats? Then we shall take them. It is nearly dusk. You will order your troops to the ready, and we will strike at dark. If there are eighty men gone, that leave eighty fewer below in the aysil to defend it. We will kill them, take their boats and we will sail at once for the bay.”

“We will burn the aysil, my Kagan?” asked one of the Minghan officers, Ajai.

“Yes, burn it to the ground,” Targutai said. “That is what you do to vermin—fetid rats like the Oirat. You burn them out.”

“My Kagan, even from a distance out on the water, the Uru’ut might see the smoke and become alarmed,” Khidyr said quietly, drawing Targutai’s gaze. “They will know what has happened.”

“Then we leave the aysil and butcher those within it,” Targutai said. “Every man who draws breath among them—every woman, every child—I want a blade, spear or arrow through them.” He glanced at Jebe. “Beginning with this one.”

Jebe blinked at him, uttering a soft, strangled sound of abject terror from his throat.

“But...but my Kagan, this man has served you well this past year,” Neikun said.

“He will serve no purpose—well or otherwise—with no Uru’ut remaining to spy upon,” Targutai said. He nodded at Ulagan. “Do it. Cut his throat.”

“Yes, my Kagan,” Ulagan said, nodding his head. He reached out, closing his fist about Jebe’s braided hair, wrenching the Oirat man’s head back. Jebe opened his mouth, a breathless, frightened caw fluttering out, and then there was a wink of lamp light off of silver as Ulagan drew his blade beneath the shelf of his chin. Blood spurted from the wound, splattering against the ground, running down Jebe’s neck and torso in a sudden, grisly flood. Jebe’s last breaths gurgled and wheezed through his severed blood vessels and cleaved windpipe, and when Ulagan opened his hand, releasing the Oirat’s hair, he crumpled to the ground, face-first, his body twitching, his fingertips scrabbling feebly against the dirt. Blood pooled around his body in a glistening, widening circumference and the fragrance of it, thick, hot and metallic, filled the narrow confines of the maikhan.

“Get your Minghan in order,” Targutai said to Neikun. “Question me again, bahadur, and your throat will open next. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Kagan,” Neikun said, blinking at the blood upon the ground, visibly stricken.

“Temuchin Arightei will not claim my dragons,” Targutai seethed, glaring at them all each in turn. “You can mark me at that. If I have to kill every Oirat in Ulus myself to see it done, then I will. They are my dragons. Whether it is falcon or man—it is my guide

who is showing them the way. I am the Negh—and this is my journey, my destiny, my damn dragons!”

He turned about and stomped out of the tent, shoving aside the flap covering the threshold behind him.

“My Kagan, if any of the Oirat should survive in the aysil, they will surely find a way to warn the others, and the false one,” Khidyr said, and he paused, turning to look over his shoulder at her.

“Then be certain none of them survive,” he said. “Kill them all. Leave them for the ikhamas to scavenge.”

The raid against the Uru’ut aysil lasted nearly three hours in full. They were a small tribe of Oirat, less than two hundred people all together. With so many of their men, their strongest warriors gone, the Khahl had believed those remaining would be virtually helpless against the onslaught of the Minghan. They had been mistaken.

Targutai’s forces had descended under the cover of dusk-draped shadows, swooping down from the foothills surrounding the meager encampment on the fleet paws of their bergelmirs. The giant weasels, each as large as a horse, boasted stocky, muscular builds, massive limbs capable of swift, broad paces, large heads and heavy, coarse fur. They were strong, naturally aggressive animals, and they plowed through the aysil, tromping down gers and small maikhans with their broad, clawed paws. As the bergelmirs drove the Uru’ut from their tents, fleeing and shrieking toward the nearby woods and slopes, the mounted Minghan archers dispatched of them quickly and efficiently. Others still reined their bergelmirs into the frightened mass of Oirat, their scimitars swinging.

They had caught the Uru’ut by surprise, but not defenseless. Yisun realized she should have known better; of all of the Oirat tribes, the Uru’ut were without question the fiercest, and when cornered and faced with despairing odds, they only seem spurred to fight harder. Even the ones who seemed the most vulnerable among them—women, children and elders—were trained and familiar with battle, and once they had recovered from their initial panic, they had retaliated against the Minghan with vicious, desperate ferocity.

Despite this attempt, the Uru'ut were outnumbered. Though they fought with almost admirable determination, they were no match for the sheer numbers of Targutai's forces. The sounds of screaming had bounced between the Khar foothills and the sea, resounding in the darkness like the tolling of shrill, resonant bells and by the light of the Uru'ut's small cooking fires, the snow around the circles of tents was soon trampled and stained with blood.

When at last, the cries faded into relative silence, the Uru'ut were defeated—though the Khahl had lost twenty of their own in the fray. Squadrons of Targutai's bergelmir riders loped off among the trees and foothills to make certain none had managed to escape. The rest of the Khahl dismounted and began to make their way on foot through the camp, prodding with spears and scimitars among the fallen, collecting weapons, food and supplies from the Oirat gers.

Yisun walked among the aysil, a torch in one hand, her scimitar in the other. She paused now and then, kicking the toe of her gutal against bellies or shoulders of Uru'ut, turning bodies over in the snow and admiring the handiwork of well-placed arrows or delivered blade strikes. She tried not to smile; such smug satisfaction was a sign of weakness, but she could not help herself. Targutai had rallied his forces well and truly. Her son had led the charge into the aysil—a feat unheard of among the cowardly Torachan troops, whose leaders kept toward the back of the ranks, where it was likely safest. Targutai had ridden astride his bergelmir at the front of the jaguns, his scimitar raised above his head, his brows furrowed, his mouth opened as he bellowed out a piercing, furious battle cry. She had nearly wept with pride to behold him.

Already some of the Minghan were beginning to haul supplies from their encampment in the hills down to the beach, loading them onto the Uru'ut longboats, preparing to take to the sea. Yisun listened to the occasional, melodic twang of bowstrings, the whisper of sharpened steel cleaving the air and subsequent soft cries as archers and swordsmen dispatched any Oirat found alive among the fallen tents and bodies.

They would be leaving soon; Targutai had been adamant on this. He had ordered the archers to kill the village shamans first lest they somehow call upon their utha sulds to send word in warning to Yeb Oyugundei and the false one; their yellow dels marked

the shamans easy targets for the soldiers' keen aims. He had commanded that every Uru'ut's death be verified in swift measure now that the massacre was over, and that every man report at the ready to the beach within the hour.

He had never reminded her more of Bujiragh, those aspects of her husband's nature she had loved and admired. Bujiragh had been a boor to his wife, but he had also been a fierce and formidable warrior and strategist, traits that had apparently been passed along in full measure to his son. It was as though with the hilt of his scimitar, or the grip of his composite bow in hand, Targutai aged twenty years; as though his father's suld, an ancestral spirit of the Duuajin clan had seized possession of Targutai's young form, giving his child's body the prowess and power of a man.

Yisun had watched in breathless amazement as Targutai had exchanged sword for bow during the raid. He had fired again and again until the quiver at his hip was empty, his aim unwavering and true, his movements swift beyond any comprehension. Twenty-four arrows fired; twenty-four Uru'ut felled. Targutai was ruthless. He did not aim for limbs or joints. His arrowheads found their mark in hearts and skulls, skewering through eyes and foreheads as readily as sternums and breasts.

He is magnificent, Yisun thought. He is the Negh—truly the one who will reclaim our ancient empire and restore us to greatness. This victory more than any other surely promises that. The Tengri made a mistake with their Dologhon mark. If this measure of skill does not prove my Targutai the Negh, then the prophecies must be false, for there can be no other.

The most important thing was that Targutai had accomplished this on his own. In Kharhorin, he was accustomed to deferring to his mother, or resorting to petulant, childish tantrums to get his way. He was tasting of freedom for the first time, making his own decisions well and wisely, and she was proud of him. He did not realize she was with him, offering him quiet counsel and advice; she wore Khidyr's form, and when he looked at her, he saw only the yeke idugan. Even still, Yisun had not needed to do more than offer gentle prodding that he might see the best course of action. Once he had understood circumstances in full, as she pointed them out to him, he had decided of his own will what would become of it. She had never doubted these capabilities within her son, but to witness them first hand left her trembling with wonder and admiration.

A soft moan attracted her attention, and Yisun paused, shifting her grip against her scimitar as she pivoted toward the sound. A maikhan had collapsed to her right, the heavy folds of hide drooping inward upon support beams splintered beneath a bergelmir's bulk. She could see a portion of the fallen tent quivering, moving, and as she watched, a hand fumbled weakly from beneath the edge of hide, pawing against the ground.

Yisun walked slowly around the tent, her gutal falling silently in the snow-crusting dirt and grass. A woman, grievously injured, bleeding and whimpering, crawled out from beneath the maikhan. She was so focused on her movement, so desperately determined that she did not even notice Yisun at first. Her brows were furrowed, her teeth gritted. Blood streamed down her face from a deep gash along her brow; her lips were battered and bloody, her nose broken. She kicked her feet feebly, her gutal scrabbling for purchase on the ground as she inched her way out from beneath the maikhan, and she huddled for a long moment, trembling against the snow, her breath shuddering and whimpering from her throat.

Yisun stepped near to her, and as the sole of her boot settled softly next to the woman's arm, the Uru'ut raised her head, blinking dazedly up at Yisun, squinting against the glare of Yisun's torch. Yisun let the edge of her scimitar fall against the shelf of the woman's chin, and the two stared at one another, Khahl and Oirat, ancient enemies, their facial features and structures so similar they might have been kin.

"Khahl...bagasu..." the Uru'ut woman hissed at Yisun, blood peppering from her mouth as she called Yisun *dung* in Ulusian. She hooked her fingers in the snow and dead grass and struggled to sit up, lifting her chin defiantly against Yisun's blade.

"Oirat bitch," Yisun said, and the woman held her gaze, her brows narrowing. The Uru'ut harked up a weak mouthful of fluid and spat at Yisun. Bloody spittle smacked against the ground.

"I...I will dance..." the Oirat said. "We...we will all dance...in the spirit...tree...when Temuchin Arightei...turns the dragons...against you..."

"Save your breath," Targutai said from behind Yisun. There was a sharp snap of wind, and a wet, crunching sound. The Uru'ut woman's head jerked violently on the hinge of her neck, and she sprawled backwards, landing on her back in the snow. Her

hands waggled momentarily in the air before dropping lifelessly to her sides. The shaft of an arrow, buried almost midway along the thick shaft, protruded from between her eyes.

Yisun turned and found her son standing nearby, his bow still poised, cocked at an angle before him, his arm outstretched. His brows were furrowed deeply beneath the lip of his helmet; the firelight from her torch danced across the gold-plated dome. Targutai lowered the bow and met Khidyr's gaze. He looked so much like his father at that moment, Yisun's knees nearly failed her.

"Women should not kill," he said to her. "In battle, the kill brings buyan to the warrior—strengthens the male aspects of his nature. Women are not warriors. They do not need such buyan."

"Yes, my Kagan," Yisun said, lowering her head lest he see her smile at him proudly.

"Sheath your scimitar and go to the boats where it is safest, bugu Khidyr," Targutai said. "I will finish searching this part of the aysil."

"Yes, my Kagan," she said again.

Yisun sat on a bench in one of the beached longboats, waiting for the Minghan to finish their preparations for leaving. She closed her eyes, feeling the frigid bite of the evening wind off of the bitter water against her face.

So much has come to pass, qayira, she thought, speaking to Khidyr in her mind, calling her *love*.

Troublesome omens, Khidyr replied.

Yisun shook her head. *Not troublesome,* she thought. *A riddle. We have found the Uru'ut aysil and destroyed it. Some of them left earlier in the evening, eighty of their strongest warriors bound by boat for the mouth of the Toda River at Tolui Bay. We are taking their longboats and following them. Targutai was magnificent. You should have seen him, qayira.*

What do you mean 'riddle?' Khidyr asked. Something was wrong; Yisun could sense it. It was as though the space shared between their minds trembled with anxious energy. Something had happened, something that had upset Khidyr.

The golden falcon is not a bird, Yisun thought. Aigiarn Chinuajin sent word to the Uru'ut, summoning them to the bay. She said the falcon was a riddle—not a bird at all, but a man from the west, a place across the sea called Tiralainn. The baga'han live there yet, it seems and this man—whose name is 'falcon'—can speak their language. He can translate Yesugei's map and lead them to the lair. Ag'iamon's promise was a riddle in disguise—the falcon is a man.

He is not a man, Khidyr said grimly. I do not know what he is, but he is no man.

Yisun's brows narrowed slightly. What do you mean?

Your news offers explanations to me now, Khidyr said, though she seemed distant, as if she mused to herself. I gathered my shamans to me this afternoon after I left Lord Tertius with the concubines. We tried to see the false one, to mark his progress north from Capua. Strange visions were revealed to us—an unfamiliar man in the company of the Oirat, with ears like a wolf's, and hair like the sun.

Ordinarily, Khidyr might have dispatched her ami spirit from her body, letting it assume its inherent form as a bird so that she could soar about, and spy upon enemies from the sky. She possessed strong enough hiimori to accomplish such a difficult task, and her utha suld, Vachir, was a powerful enough ancestral spirit to help guide Khydir's ami along the proper course and keep it from its natural inclination to fly off to the great spirit tree—killing Khydir. However, the soliqu ritual that had nestled Khidyr's ami within Yisun's form left her unwilling to attempt such risk. If something were to go wrong, it would be Yisun's form Khidyr's ami abandoned—and Yisun's body that would die without Khidyr's mind spirit to infuse it.

Bugu Chilgei attempted the spirit flight to find the Oirat, Khidyr said to Yisun. He was the strongest of my twelve, and I thought if he kept his distance, if the rest of us summoned our uthas to guide and shield his ami, that Yeb Oyugundei would not be able to sense his presence.

Her voice faded, and Yisun opened her eyes, blinking out upon the water. "What has happened?" she whispered.

Something new is with them, Khidyr said. Something powerful—some sort of ayy, or nature spirit, either an endur sky suld or a gazriin ezen earthen spirit, I could not tell. It happened so fast, and I have never sensed the likes of it. Bugu Chilgei shared his

visions with us through our uthas. I could see this man-falcon, with golden hair and dark eyes, his ears pointed like a fox, his face painted like a slave's and then it came upon us—something so powerful, so fierce, it physically threw all of my shamans across the room, lifted us from the floor and hurled us like discarded toys. Bugu Chilgei...he bled from every orifice, his eyes, his nose, his mouth and ears. He convulsed upon the ground, clawing at his throat and shrieking. 'The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds,' he screamed...over and over, nothing but this. 'The measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds.'

Yisun closed her eyes. *What does it mean, Khidyr?*

It means you are in danger, Yisun, Khidyr whispered, her voice frightened. The man-falcon is guarded by something I have never known before—a spirit seized with more hiimori than a thousand yeke shamans. It is protecting him—and now it is protecting Temuchin Arightei, as well. It killed Bugu Chilgei. He tore open his own throat with his bare hands and spilled his life upon the floor to escape its force within his mind. If it can do this to a shaman who has twelve others to protect him, guide him, then it will see plainly through the feather talismans I have given to you. It will know you are coming, qayira and it will stop you.

It is Dobun, Yisun thought, frowning. It is Dobun's suld; he has come to defend his heir, continue his deceit against the Tengri. What else could it be? What other ayy spirit would offend the Tegsh and aid the Oirat? You must stop it somehow, Khidyr. We cannot turn back now. This is Targutai's destiny, and ours, as well. It is for the good of the empire—and the Khahl.

I cannot stop it, Yisun, Khidyr said. It is stronger than Vachir, than any of our utha guides.

Then find a spirit that is stronger! Yisun snapped. Find your own damn ayy spirit and channel it! Barter with it, beg of it—do what you must! Whatever it takes, Khidyr. We are not turning back. We are not stopping.

Khidyr was silent for a long moment. At last, she said, *What you are asking of me is very dangerous, Yisun.*

A sudden, steady downpour of sleet began to fall; Yisun felt it pelting against her hat and shoulders in hundreds of miniscule, icy beads. She could hear it whispering in

the air around her, hissing as it danced across the water. *What I am asking of you is for the good of the kingdom, Khidyr, she thought. And the Khahl. See it done. Do not fail Targutai—or me.*

Chapter Eight

Rhyden dreamed of Qynh. The Queen sat before a vanity in her bedchamber at the palace in Belgaeran, gazing into a mirror at the reflection of her face. He stood behind her as her lovely fingers draped against her hair, as she canted her wrist and eased a brush slowly through the glossy black tendrils and curls.

You are so beautiful, he thought, watching the reflection of candlelight dance in her large blue eyes. The shadows of the room caressed and framed the contours of her face, following the tapered slope of her nose, the rounded curves of her cheeks and chin. Her shoulders were bare, the neckline of her gown cut deeply enough to reveal the narrow margin of pale, soft flesh between her breasts. He had kissed her there a thousand times in nearly as many dreams. He longed to do so again, to touch her, place his hands against her shoulders, but he did not move. He watched Qynh brush her hair, her eyes distant and somewhat melancholy as she looked at herself in the mirror.

For some reason, he could hear the faint sounds of crow cries from beyond the chamber windows, as though hundreds of the birds had taken up roosts in the trees surrounding the palace. The sound did not seem to bother Qynh, and she seemed to take no notice as her eyes followed the reflected motions of her hands in the glass.

"I am sorry, Qynh," Rhyden whispered. She did not hear him. He had dreamed of her many times over the last two weeks since the Oirat had taken him from Capua, but Qynh had never heard him in these dreams, never been aware of his presence. He had stopped trying to tell her what had happened, or asking her to help him, because it was useless. It was as though a wall had grown between them; a wall of thick, impenetrable glass, tinted on her side to block her view, leaving him alone, looking helplessly in at her.

He had broken her heart. When he had sent her away in his last dream aboard the *a'Maorga*, Rhyden had broken Qynh's heart, and whatever sight Trejaeran had restored within her, she had suppressed it, receding from it...and from Rhyden. She did not want to be found anymore. He could sense her sorrow and it pained him beyond any measure, because he knew he was to blame.

He watched her set aside the brush and rise to her feet, the folds of her gossamer gown draping gracefully about her slender form. The slip was luminescent, translucent in the soft, golden light, and he could see the silhouetted outline of her breasts, her delicate waist, hips and thighs through the fabric. Her bare feet whispered against the stone floor as she turned, and for one fleeting moment, Rhyden's breath drew still as her gaze seemed to meet his. She walked past him, oblivious to his presence, moving near enough that he could pivot and follow her stride.

He reached for her reflexively, his hands passing through her as if he were made of smoke. He could not feel her, but he drew in her fragrance, sweet and haunting like the perfume of gardenia blossoms.

"I love you, Qynh," he said softly as his heart ached.

"She cannot hear you, Rhyden," Trejaeran said, and Rhyden turned to find his friend standing beside the vanity, leaning against the wall. He gazed at Rhyden, his eyes troubled and sad.

"I...I know, bidein," Rhyden whispered, nodding.

"I love you," Rhyden heard a voice say from behind him, and he turned, seeing his King, Qynh's husband Kierken standing on the far side of the room, smiling as Qynh approached him. As she drew near, Kierken cradled her face between her hands and stepped forward to meet her, settling his lips against hers.

"Why do you do this, Rhyden?" Trejaeran asked. "Why do you want to punish yourself like this?"

"Because I deserve it." Rhyden watched, stricken, as Qynh lifted her chin to meet Kierken's, her hands draping against his face. "It is my measure."

She walked backwards, drawing Kierken in tow, kissing him deeply. Kierken's hands slid down her throat and along the slopes of her shoulders, easing the sleeveless gown down from about her neck. She slipped her arms loose in turn, and the gown drooped about her waist. Kierken pressed his hands against her breasts, touching her as Rhyden had in his mind through the sight only days earlier.

"She is doing what you asked of her," Trejaeran said as the King and Queen reached their bed. The back of Qynh's knees met the mattress and she sat as Kierken

leaned toward her, kissing her throat, his mouth trailing toward her breasts. She tangled her fingers in his hair and tilted her head back, whispering his name softly.

“She is giving Kierken the chance to earn her trust again, her love,” Trejaeran said. “She is remembering, Rhyden...remembering why she loved him in the first place.”

“I know, bidein,” Rhyden said, nodding again. Qynh opened the front of Kierken’s shirt, raising her hips from the bed so that he could slide the folds of her gown away from her legs. He watched Kierken kiss Qynh’s stomach, his lips traveling slowly against the soft confines of the womb where he thought his child grew within her.

“He is her a’leitheid, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said. “Her match. They are meant to be together.”

Rhyden felt the sting of tears in his eyes at this; it was something he had always known, of course, but to hear it aloud, to hear Trejaeran say it seemed to sear it with poignant, painful clarity in his heart and mind. He might have known less suffering had someone thrust a broadsword through his gut and then twisted the blade repeatedly, forcing it in all the more. He set his jaw at a stern angle, locking it as he pressed his back teeth together and lowered his eyes to the floor.

“I am sorry,” Trejaeran said, standing before him. He seemed weaker than usual somehow to Rhyden, his form more translucent and shadow-like than solid, and his face was fraught with fatigue. “Your heart keeps drawing you here because you will not let her go. You do not deserve this pain, Rhyden.”

“But I do.” Rhyden turned away with a pained gasp, covering his face with his hand, unable to bear watching Kierken make love to Qynh. He listened to the faint cacophony of crows from outside of the windows; the fluttering of their wings seemed like wind rushing through dried leaves, buffeting against the palace. He could hear the soft sounds of Kierken and Qynh together; Kierken murmuring to her, telling her she was beautiful; the sound of his mouth and hands against her skin; the sounds of her breath and voice as he moved against her. Rhyden could hear them, and every word, every sound was that same cruel broadsword wrenching into his heart.

“I love you,” Qynh said to Kierken, her voice breathless and soft. “I love you...so much...”

“Mo’ghra,” Kierken said, kissing her, calling her *my love*.

“I deserve this because it is my shame...my measure,” Rhyden whispered, hanging his head. “I know it is—every day I am broken a little more by it, Trejaeran.”

“No, Rhyden,” Trejaeran said quietly. His voice faded, as though a wind caught it and carried it away from Rhyden. “This is not your measure. It never has been.”

Rhyden felt something touch his face, and his eyes flew open. He jerked, drawing in a sharp, startled breath, and he realized he was awake, lying on his side on the Oirat longboat. His breath frosted in the air before him, and he could hear the pelting rhythm of heavy sleet falling against the hide canopy overhead. He had left a small stone lamp burning, its wick dimmed beside his pallet before letting his mind drift into slumber, and by its soft glow, he saw Aigiarn kneeling beside him. Beads of sleet glistened, clinging to the fur of her hat, the trim of her del. She had caressed his cheek; he had pulled away from her in his fright, and she lowered her hand slowly, making no effort to touch him again.

“Are you alright?” she asked, her voice quiet.

Rhyden tucked his elbow beneath him to prop himself up, and he pressed his other hand against his brow, feeling the soft burlagh fur of his hat trim against his fingertips. “Yes,” he whispered, feeling groggy and dazed. He nodded his chin. “Yes, thank you, I...I am alright.”

He heard Temuchin’s voice, a soft, sleepy moan, and he glanced down, not at all surprised to find the boy curled alongside of him, nearly buried from view save for the top of his cap poking out from beneath the pile of furs. Temuchin stirred but did not awaken, snuggling comfortably and falling still. Temuchin liked being near Rhyden, and would spend all day with him if he could. Even when he fell asleep on his own pallet at the stem of the knarr, he would get up during the night and come to sleep beside Rhyden. The boy was nearly adulating in his persistent regard for reasons Rhyden did not understand, but was touched by nonetheless. He glanced at Aigiarn, drawing his legs beneath him as he sat up, wondering if she was aggravated to discover her son in his company yet again.

“I heard your voice.” Aigiarn smiled as she looked down at Temuchin and brushed her hand against the outline of his shoulder beneath the furs. “I thought Temu might be bothering you.”

“No,” Rhyden said. “No, never. I talk in my sleep sometimes, that is all. Temu is alright. He is a good lad, and I do not mind his company.”

He had learned some time ago that Temuchin was not Toghrul’s son. Yeb had explained this, saying that Temuchin’s father, a man named Yesugei Bokeagha had been murdered in an assault by their enemies, the Khahl when Temuchin had been only days old. Of Yesugei’s tribe, the Naiman, only Yeb, Aigiarn and Temuchin had survived the brutal attack. Toghrul had been one of Yesugei’s Oirat allies, and dearest friends. They had gone to live with his tribe, the Kelet, and Toghrul had taken care of the boy as though Temu was his own.

Aigiarn smiled, meeting Rhyden’s gaze. “Temu likes you. You have hung the moon and harnessed the stars to hear him tell.”

Rhyden felt color stoke in his cheeks and he glanced down at the sleeping boy. “I...I do not know about that,” he said. Temuchin’s hand lay draped near his face, his fingertips protruding from beneath the furs. Rhyden reached down, smiling softly, fondly as Temuchin curled his fingers about Rhyden’s. He thought of Trejaeran’s words offered to him in the woods on the day he had awoken among the Oirat.

Temuchin needs you. He is special, Rhyden—more special than you can realize yet.

“He is a good boy,” he said again quietly.

“Do you have any children of your own?”

“No.” Rhyden shook his head. “I never had much patience for children.”

“You get along very well with Temu,” Aigiarn observed, making him smile again.

“Yes, well, Temu is easy to get along with,” he told her, with a shrug and a quiet laugh.

“Who is Qynh?” Aigiarn asked, and he blinked at her, startled. “You kept calling out that name. I thought it might be your wife, that you might have a family with her back at your home. I have heard you say that name before in your sleep.”

“No,” Rhyden said. “I am not married. Qynh is just...a woman I know. A woman in Tiralainn. I dream of her sometimes.”

Aigiarn met his gaze. She never seemed abashed or ashamed to look someone in the eye, to hold her attention there, no matter the topic of conversation. She was not one for shyness or coy courtesies. Rhyden had come to admire this about her.

“You sound sad when you call to her,” she observed.

He managed another smile as he lowered his eyes to his lap. Unlike Aigiarn, he had difficulty holding someone’s gaze when he felt disconcerted. “They are dreams that often leave me sad.”

They were a day away from Tolui Bay, and expected to reach the Forks of Sube along the northern Lydian coastline by dawn. In the last twelve days, Rhyden had astonished himself by translating much of at least the first half of the journey described in Aigiarn’s map. He had found a great deal of help in his efforts from Yeb. The translations Rhyden derived from the archaic Chegney made little if any sense to him but Yeb would be able to find landmarks or points of reference on the crudely drawn map to help solve the puzzling riddles hidden within the words.

“Let the Urlug lead you east to where the hands of the brothers are clasped,” Rhyden had managed to decipher on his first day’s effort. It had taken him more than five hours to translate these few words, and he had been crestfallen, convinced of some error on his part when he realized they made absolutely no sense. He had stared at Yeb, stricken and confused. “That cannot be right,” he said. He sighed, nearly cross-eyed from staring at the parchment for so long. “I must have mistranslated. These runes predate the others. I think it must be ogham characters—a sort of rudimentary rune carried over from the second dynasty. I have only heard Abhacan historians and scribes describe them. They are hatchmark series, meant to resemble trees when drawn. I have never seen them before. I made a mistake somewhere, though I...hoah, I have no bloody idea where.” He had forked his fingers through his hair and shoved it back from his face in frustration.

“Are you always so hard on yourself?” Yeb had asked. The shaman had smiled at him, leaning forward to examine the map. “This is the Toda River,” he said, tapping his fingertip against the parchment. “It leads here, to another called the Urlug. And here is the Cayan River, nearly parallel to the Urlug. They cleave deep ravines between the mountains—one called Deguu Masiff, the other Aqa. They mean *younger-* and *elder-*

brother. And here..." Yeb moved his finger east along the map and tapped again. "Here is where the brothers join hands—where the Cayan and Urlug Rivers converge and form the Harw."

Rhyden and Yeb had spent many long hours after that, poring over the map together. Yeb would speak as Rhyden worked, and Rhyden was grateful for the company, and the breaks for laughter and discourse that Yeb brought to him. Among his duties to the Oirat tribes, Yeb was considered one of their principle healers, and he had been delighted and fascinated to discover Rhyden's interest and familiarity with similar ancient Elfin healing methods. The two had shared numerous conversations about medicinal herbs, poultices, infusions and treatments and Rhyden had come to find comfort in Yeb's gentle, soft-spoken nature, ease in his wry and pointed sense of humor.

Aigiarn had warmed to Rhyden as the days had passed, as well. For the first few days, she had regarded him darkly, warily. She had treated him brusquely and dismissively, and had done her best to keep Temuchin away from him. Rhyden had not been especially fond of Aigiarn, either. In addition to holding him against her will, she struck him as the sort of overzealous, driven person who would make any sacrifice to achieve her goal. She was determined to find the dragons' lair—relentless on the matter, from Rhyden's observation—and he had found it disturbing that the woman would strive so doggedly for something that would likely see her son dead.

However, it did not take long for Rhyden's diligent efforts to translate the map to soften Aigiarn's hardened, brusque exterior. Nor did it take long before he had tempered his own misgivings about her. He could see what a good mother she was just from his observations of her and Temuchin aboard the knarr. He did not need the sight to realize her love for him, or the tender devotion she felt toward her son. The more occasions Aigiarn took to speak with Rhyden, the more he came to realize that she was as bright as she was beautiful, that she was driven more by desperation than determination. She sought to do only that which she felt was right—not for herself, but for Temuchin and her people. The Oirat had led lives of hardship and loss for as long as anyone could remember. The pursuit of the dragons' lair was the solitary scrap of hope the

beleaguered race held for the future. Aigiarn saw herself as charged with fulfilling that hope for them, for delivering the destiny promised to her people.

“Do you miss your home in Tiralainn?” Aigiarn asked, drawing Rhyden’s mind from his distant thoughts. “Is that why your dreams of it...of this woman, Qynh make you sad?”

“I do not...” he began, and he glanced down at his hands. “I have not considered Tiralainn my home for many years. I was returning from there when a storm damaged our ship, and we had to stop in Capua for repairs. Before that, I had thought I might go back again, that it might be home to me after all.”

“You do not think that now?”

Rhyden shook his head. “No,” he said. “I realize now that I was mistaken. Tiralainn is not my home.”

“Torach is,” Aigiarn said, and he shook his head again, offering a soft laugh.

“No, Torach is where I keep my books,” he said. “My clothes, some odds and ends of furniture.” He looked at her. “I do not suppose anyplace has felt much like home to me for a long time.”

“Me, either,” Aigiarn said, and she gazed down at her son, stroking her hand against the pate of his hat. “We move so often—we have to. It has always been that way, but it is hard. I know the Nuqut’s every corner and measure like I know my own name, but I feel lost within it sometimes.”

Rhyden empathized with the sudden forlornness that had filled her voice. *Lost* was as good a word as any to describe how he felt, torn between Tiralainn and Torach, out-of-place and unfamiliar in both of these realms.

“We will reach Tolui Bay tomorrow,” Aigiarn said.

He nodded. “I do not think I will have your map translated in full by then. I will try, but I...”

“It is alright,” Aigiarn said. “You have done your best, and we are grateful to you. I am grateful to you, Rhyden.”

He looked at her, meeting her gaze. “One of our tribes, the Uru’ut will send men by boat to meet us,” she said. “I sent word to them two days ago with our courier falcon.

They will be fresh and well-rested. Toghrul, Yeb, Temu and I will go with them, while the others aboard this knarr will deliver you back to Capua.”

Rhyden blinked at her, somewhat surprised. “You mean to go on? Into the mountains?”

“We have to,” she replied. “I know you do not understand this. I do not expect you to. But yes, we will go on into the mountains, toward the lair.”

“But you do not know the way,” he said. “Not all of it, Aigiarn—less than half of it, in fact. The Khar mountains stretch for hundreds of miles in all directions. What if you—?”

“We still have the map,” Aigiarn said. “I would like to take the notes you have made during your translations, if I may. I will give them to Yeb. He has been helping you, learning from you. I think

I hope

that he will be able to determine the rest of the passage for us as we go.”

Rhyden had caught that fleeting thought—*I hope*—from Aigiarn’s mind, along with a sudden, poignant sense of her emotions, her fear. *She is uncertain*, he thought. *She is frightened. She does not truly believe Yeb will be able to finish reading the map, and she knows what will happen if they lose their way. She knows she will die—they will all die.*

“Why would you do this?” he whispered, and for the first time, Aigiarn lowered her gaze to the floor of the boat.

“Because we have to,” she said softly. “It is Temuchin’s destiny. It is what he was born to do—what the Tengri meant for him. Many, many people have died

Yesugei died

over many, many millennia so that we could come to this moment, have this chance. I will not...I cannot see all of that sacrifice and struggle, that loss be in vain.”

He had sensed the thought of her husband, Yesugei, as well, and he realized her pain. She had loved Yesugei; even the momentary flutter of his name through her mind was enough to cast her face in sorrow. His death had broken her; she was broken still.

Rhyden reached for her, closing his hand against hers and drawing her gaze.

Temuchin needs you, Trejaeran had told him. *He is special, Rhyden—more special than you can realize yet. He needs you to lead them into the mountains.* “Take me with you, Aigiarn.”

She looked up, startled. “That was not our arrangement.”

“The arrangement was that you would send me back when I translated the map,” he said. “Which I have not done yet.”

Aigiarn’s brows drew slightly and she pulled her hand away. “I was angry when I said that to you,” she said. “And I was wrong. I have not wanted to keep you here against your will. That was never my intention, even in Capua, and I—”

“I am not here against my will, Aigiarn,” he said. “Maybe at first, but not anymore.” Temuchin groaned again quietly, wriggling beneath the blankets. He looked down at the boy, his expression softening. “You need me. With Yeb’s help, I could finish translating the map along the way. We have a good week or two’s worth of journey already plotted out. That is plenty of time to finish. Take me with you.”

“I cannot ask that of you, Rhyden.”

“You are not asking it of me,” he said. “I am offering freely. Take me with you. Please, Aigiarn.”

She looked at him for a long moment, moved. She nodded once, her mouth unfolding in a slight, delicate smile that seemed to illuminate her entire face. “Alright,” she said. She offered her hand to him; Temu had explained this gesture of Rhyden’s to all of the Oirat, and every time any of them greeted him now, he had to laugh as they extended their hands affably.

Rhyden closed his hand against her forearm, feeling her fingers tighten against his. “Bayarla,” she said to him in Ulusian. *Thank you.*

He lowered his head respectfully to her. In addition to learning Tiralainnian customs, Temu had been teaching Rhyden of his own among the Oirat, as well as common words and phrases in their native tongue. “Ci ayu zugeer,” Rhyden replied, making Aigiarn smile. *You are welcome.*

The Forks of Sube marked the northern boundary of the Torachan empire, with Lydia and Ulus to the south and the free Engjold state of Sube to the north. Sube was a

relatively small peninsula off the mainland, Eng, inhabited by a race of nomadic tribes called the Enghan. As the Uru'ut knarr ventured from the Chagan Sea into the forked harbors of this disputed waterway, they tacked a course that bore them into the land and brought them along shore, keeping near to the Lydian coastline and in potentially treacherous shallow waters. It was the long way around to reach the point where the Toda River met the harbor; they might have more quickly and easily sailed to the northern coast of Tolui Bay and followed it down, but it would have also proven far more dangerous.

“Enghan live in Sube,” Temuchin told Rhyden as the two of them stood amidship and gazed together out across the water toward the distant northern coast. The sleet had yielded to steady, dust-like snowfall. The sky over them was swollen with low-hanging grey clouds, and the granite border of Sube's mountainous cliffs and rugged shoreline seemed shrouded in a surrealistic haze.

“The Uru'ut trade with them sometimes,” Temu said. “That is where they learned to build knarrs, like this one—from the Enghan. But they do not like the empire at all, or us very much, either. We conquered them once, when my ancestor, Kagan Borjigidal built his empire. They are still sore about that, I guess. They might shoot arrows at us if we get too close to them.”

They sailed along the western shore of the expansive Tolui Bay and Rhyden admired the view of the Khar Mountains as they reached out with splayed granite fingertips toward the sea. He had seen mountains before, plenty of times, both in Tiralainn and the Morthir, but the sight of them, dark and angular, cragged and snow-draped always left him breathless with wonder. Some of the Khar peaks were high enough to disappear within the cloud cover; distant slopes and crests loomed like shadows, dreamlike and illusive beyond the shore.

“A long time ago, people called these the Yekegal, or *great fire* mountains,” Temuchin said. “Golomto, the fire spirit lives there. She got angry once with Etseg and Itugen, her parents—father of the sky and mother of the earth. Golomto threw fire from the mountains and into the sky to try and punish Etseg and Itugen. She sent smoke and ash into the clouds to choke the sun and suffocate the earth. Her brothers, Usan, the water spirit and Keiden, lord of wind stopped her. Keiden blew her fires out, the ashes

away to sea. Usan closed the holes in the mountains from which Golomto sent her fires, and he filled them all with water.”

“Is that so?” Rhyden asked, gazing out upon the Khar.

Temuchin nodded. “Yes. Golomto was tired after throwing so much fire and fighting with her brothers, so Usan and Keiden decided to trick her. Usan made rivers flow, and the sound of the current lulled her. Keiden sent cool winds to soothe her brow, and Golomto could not help herself; she fell asleep. She has been asleep ever since—a long, long time. So long that the Erdene Nur lake—the largest in the Khar—formed above her eyelid, and the great mountains Ondur Dobu and Mongke grew over her breasts. Whenever we make fire now, it comes from her. She dreams of it.”

They ran the knarr aground on the shores of Lydia, a scrap of muddy, pebbled beach framed by pine forests and mountains. The Toda River drained into the sea a few miles west of here, a wide, dark channel cleaving a path through the woods and granite. The trees and ground were covered with a thick blanket of snow, crusted with an thin, outer layer of brittle ice. The Oirat hauled the longboat from the water’s edge, all of the men working together to drag and shove its heavy bulk across the beach and into the treeline for cover.

“This land is part of the empire,” Aigiarn said to Rhyden. He had tried to help with the knarr, but Toghrul had sent him retreating with a stern and dismissive scowl. Rhyden had come to stand beside Aigiarn, Yeb and Temuchin along the beach, watching the others labor. “Torach does not send their tall ships beyond the straits of Garyelloch often anymore, but we cannot take a chance that they might and would see our boat on the beach.

“Juchin and the Uru’ut should be here by tomorrow morning,” she said, turning to Yeb. “They set sail two days ago from Qoyina bay, the other harbor fork of Sube, in the Nuqut. We will follow as much of the Toda and Urlug as we can in the knarrs. Was the map able to give you any idea of what we might expect?”

“Rocks,” Yeb said, making her frown. “Fast water, large rocks and bears.”

“Bears?” Aigiarn asked, glancing at Rhyden and raising her brow.

“I think it said *bee er dty arrey son carrickas shen lheillean rish maghouina*,” Rhyden said. “Meaning, *beware of cliffs that move like bears*.”

“Cliffs that move like bears?” Aigiarn repeated, her frown deepening. “What does that mean?”

“I do not know,” Rhyden said. “It could be part of old Abhacan folklore. They have stories about bears that were made of stone, and tall enough to hold up the mountainsides. They would eat anyone that wandered into their caves—or naughty children who did not eat their barley.”

“Most people think the dragons’ lair is just a tale,” Aigiarn said dryly. “Sometimes there is more fact than lore in legends.” She reached down, unfettering her knife from the sash about her waist. She tossed it to Rhyden, who caught it deftly and blinked at her in surprise. “Keep it with you,” she said. “When Juchin arrives, I will get you a scimitar to carry, as well. We do not know what to expect once we get into the mountains. Giant bears made of stone may be the least of our worries.”

“Do you think there are really rock bears, Rhyden?” Temuchin asked. Nearly an hour had passed since their arrival on the beach. The Oirat had worked in swift, efficient measure, hiding their knarr and using the hide canopies they had suspended from the stem and stern to erect lean-to shelters among the trees. They had braced the canopies with pine limbs, draping boughs about the outside for added camouflage and protection from the bitter wind.

Rhyden and Temuchin stood in a small clearing among the trees near the encampment, bouncing one of Temu’s small boku balls back and forth between them. Temuchin had been teaching Rhyden different games with the toy over the last week, and Rhyden had grown fairly nimble smacking the ball against the hooked toe of his boot, or the side of his heel. Today, they played pingachu, a game where participants performed intricate series of ball bounces and toe taps against the ground. Whoever could keep the ball in motion the longest while doing so won. So far, Temuchin had Rhyden four games to one.

“No, Temu,” Rhyden said, glancing at him as he clipped the boku with the side of his ankle. “Rock bears are not real. They are just a story.” The ball bounced further to the left than he anticipated, and before he could catch it against his toe, it smacked into the snow.

Temu grinned. "Five for me."

"You are cheating," Rhyden said, pretending to frown. He reached down, closing his fingers about the boku and tossed it to Temuchin.

"Why would people make up a story like that if it was not true?" Temu began to bounce the ball on his toe.

"Because sometimes when people do not understand something, or are frightened by it, it is easier to make up a story that seems to explain things than to continue not knowing, or being afraid," Rhyden said. "The Abhacan live underground, in cities they built beneath mountains. I imagine they came upon a lot of bear dens, and met a lot of bears in the process. They are fairly small people—smaller than you. I am sure they found a lot of things bigger than they are frightening, like bears, and their stories built around them."

"Do you think the dragons are a story like that?" Temuchin asked, glancing at Rhyden.

Rhyden smiled at him. "No," he said. "I know dragons were real once. I saw one."

The boku dropped against the ground as Temuchin blinked at him, surprised and astounded. "You have seen a dragon?" he asked softly, somewhat breathlessly.

"A dead one, yes, a long time ago," Rhyden said, nodding. "Southwest of here. A tribe of people called the l'uitan took me into the mountains and showed it to me."

Temuchin's face grew somewhat saddened. "I remember the l'uitan," he said. "We used to trade with them. They raised khoni goats along the Lydian steppes, and we would barter burlagh meat and cheeses for wool. They are gone now. The Torachans took them away, sold them into slavery."

"I know," Rhyden said, gently.

"They showed you a dragon in the mountains?" Temuchin asked.

"A blue one." Rhyden nodded again. "They told me it had died during a great migration thousands of years ago. It fell out of the sky and was buried in snow and ice. A glacier pushed it down from the peaks, and when it melted, you could hike up to the slopes and see it in the ice."

"Tarva was a blue dragon," Temuchin said. "He was Dobun's, my ancestor's dragon. Tarva was Ag'iamon's son, a prince just like Dobun. Mamma tells me stories

about him sometimes. Dragons have three souls, just like we do. Did you know? Most animals only have a suni and a suld—a body spirit, and ancestral guides. They do not have amis—mind spirits—like we do. Only dragons had amis. That is why they can survive in the lair after all of this time—they sent their amis to the spirit tree to roost, and left their sunis behind to keep life in their forms. They had very strong hiimori because of their amis, too. They could speak to each other and their riders with their minds, even if their riders did not have hiimori. They could move things with their minds, protect themselves and their riders from arrows or spears.” Temuchin fell silent, and blinked down at his toes. “I...I am sure that sounds foolish to you.”

“It does not, Temu,” Rhyden said, walking toward him. He placed his hand against the boy’s shoulder, drawing his gaze. “Not at all.”

Trejaeran had been able to move things with his mind, as Temuchin had described. Rhyden remembered in the earliest days of the Second War, when the Book of Shadows had first been stolen from the Abhacan, he had been sent from Tirurnua to Edenvale, the pastoral midrealm village where he had grown up, and where Trejaeran yet lived, to warn Trejaeran of the theft. He had arrived at the small farm Trejaeran and his father owned very early one morning, and he remembered his breath drawing still as he came upon Trejaeran in the yard behind his house, standing before the barn, lowering bales of hay from the loft to the ground with nothing apparently but the power of his mind, his gift of sight.

“Trejaeran had that sort of hiimori about him,” Rhyden told Temuchin.

“He is your endur,” Temu said. “Your utha suld.”

Rhyden smiled, a mixture of kindness and sorrow. “Yes. Trejaeran was the most powerful Elfin seer who ever lived. He was the direct descendant of a very ancient race...one with hiimori like your dragons, it sounds like. They were called Na’Siogai. Elves believe that all of the mortal races came from them. They were very powerful, and Trejaeran inherited their power.”

“How did Trejaeran die?” Temuchin asked. Rhyden looked away momentarily; fifteen years had passed since Trejaeran’s death, but it never felt that long to Rhyden. In his heart, the pain and sorrow remained as if fresh and new, and he avoided speaking of it—of Trejaeran—much by habit.

“I am sorry, Rhyden,” Temu whispered. He had not missed the forlorn shadow that had crossed Rhyden’s face. “I...I should not...”

“It is alright,” Rhyden said, looking up and meeting his gaze. He brushed the cuff of his knuckles against Temu’s cheek. “I do not mind. It is still sad for me sometimes, that is all. Trejaeran killed himself. He was trying to protect those he loved from evil magic. I think he was afraid that the hiimori within him might make him do bad things one day and that he would not be able to stop himself.”

“Do you think he would have done bad things?” Temu asked.

“No, not Trejaeran. He was the bravest person I have ever known...the kindest, most decent. He died because he thought it was the right thing to do. Maybe it was. The evil magic he was trying to protect us from died with him, so I guess I will never know otherwise.”

“Do you see him when he talks to you?”

“Sometimes,” Rhyden said, and he smiled. “Sometimes I just hear his voice inside of my mind. But when I dream of him, I see him. He does not look like he did when he died. He was twenty-one years old then, and in my dreams, he looks like I remember him from when we were teen-agers together. I think he picked a form that he thought would...make me happy somehow. He looked very sad as he got older, tired and...careworn. I think having as much power as he did became a burden for him.”

“I wish I could see my father,” Temu said. “Yeb tells me that is who my utha suld is, but I have never seen him. He never comes to me, or speaks to me. He sends me pictures inside my mind, visions of things, but I do not always understand what they mean.”

Rhyden smiled again. “That is what the Elfin sight is supposed to be like,” he said. “Some of our seers could speak to spirits, but not many of them. I think maybe I can see Trejaeran because he is still strong. Even in death, his power remains strong. He wants me to see him.”

“Maybe that is why he became an endur, a sky spirit—because he is so powerful,” Temu said.

“Maybe, yes,” Rhyden said.

Temuchin looked up at him for a long moment. "I am glad you are coming with us into the mountains, Rhyden."

Rhyden thought of the premonition he had on the day he had awakened in the Oirat's company, the soft voice within his mind, the ominous realization. *If they go into the mountains, he will die*, the voice had said of Temuchin; not Trejaeran's, but some sort of warning offered by the sight nonetheless. *If they go into the mountains, he will die*.

Not if I can prevent it, Rhyden thought, and cupped his palm against Temuchin's cheek. *And by my breath...all that I have, I mean to*. "I am, too, Temu," he said, drawing a smile from the boy.

Chapter Nine

When the sun set that evening, the temperature plummeted. The Oirat huddled together beneath their lean-tos among the trees, swaddled in blankets and furs with a large fire carefully stoked and tended in the middle of them. They had been reluctant to build one out of fear of possible Torachan ships out on the harbor, but had at last abandoned their hesitation. The promise of a fire's light and heat had proven too great, and they sat about its perimeter in a circle, eating together, sharing from pouches of a fermented milk drink called qumis and talking quietly.

Toghrul had led a group of twelve men armed with bows into the woods shortly before dusk. They had returned within the hour with five felled animals in tow. Temu told Rhyden that these were alagh'ghaquai, a variety of ground-foraging rodent, diminutive cousins to the burlagh the Oirat raised as herd animals and relied on for most of their food and hides. Like burlagh, the alagh'ghaquai preferred to snoop about in the underbrush in familial groups, rooting through snow and hoarfrost for winter-dormant roots and lichens. Toghrul and his hunters had apparently tracked one such pack, and killed them all, bringing them back for a hot supper.

They had cleaned the alagh'ghaquai before bringing them to the camp, draining their blood, lopping off their heads and expertly eviscerating them. They were a people unaccustomed to wasting any portion of their quarry, be it tallow, bones, brains or entrails, and as they waited for the meat slabs to roast on spits over the fire, the hunters lamented the loss of these apparently useful bits and pieces. At the point of the kill, they had carefully buried what they did not bring back; the ground was cold enough to keep the remains from decomposing too soon, and hungry scavengers from creeping about, sniffing them out.

The meat had a tender, fibrous texture and a sweet taste. They had seasoned it with dried mushrooms they had packed among their supplies on the knarr, and the mushrooms had softened as the meat cooked, lending an pleasant, earthy flavor. Though the animals were small, and there was not much to go around, there was

enough for them all to enjoy at least a savoring taste or two, and get some warmth into their bellies.

Yeb seemed distracted during the meal. He settled his gaze on the fire as though entranced by the flames, and seemed oblivious to the affable conversations around him. He had been like this much of the day, walking by himself along the edge of the water, his hands clasped behind his back, his eyes on his toes. Every once in awhile, he would pause, turning his face toward the mountains, his brows drawn somewhat, his round, gentle features pinched and troubled. He did this during supper, as well; now and again, he would cant his chin up, turning his eyes to the sky, as if following the dancing, fluttering embers from the fire as they darted into the tree boughs and clouds.

Aigiarn noticed his odd behavior and moved to sit beside him at the fire, drawing her furs and blankets about her like the folds of a cumbersome shawl. She sank next to the shaman, tucking her legs beneath her. “Yeb, are you alright?” she asked, laying her hand against his.

He blinked as though her touch roused him from a doze and he turned to her.

“What is it?” she asked him. “What is wrong?”

“Ogotai is agitated,” he said.

“Because of the fire?” she asked. “He thinks someone will see it? The Torachans?”

Yeb shook his head, his brows narrowing a bit more. He pressed his lips together for a thoughtful moment and said, “It is not the Torachans who have disturbed him.” He looked at Aigiarn, meeting her gaze. “It is the Kahl.”

At this, the entire group of Oirat fell silent. They turned to Yeb, food and drink poised in their hands, their eyes wide and bright with sudden anxiety in the firelight.

“Are they coming, Yeb?” Aigiarn asked softly. “Are they near?”

Yeb met Rhyden’s gaze as he offered reply. “Yes. I have sensed them for several days now. Ogotai has sent visions to me, images of crows. A flock of crows flying westward, hundreds of them roosting in the trees. I have heard their voices, their cries within my mind. It is the Kahl. Their shamans have seen us—and they are coming.”

Rhyden blinked at him, startled, remembering his dream from the night before, the dream in which he had stood in Qynh's chamber at the palace in Belgaeran, listening to the cries of crows from outside the windows. He realized that the imagery of crows—either the appearance of them, or only the sounds—had been infused throughout his dreams for awhile now. He had not understood their meaning, and disregarded them for the most part, just as he had the visions of the golden falcon that had foreshadowed his meeting with the Oirat, and the role he was to play in their journey.

You have seen them, too, Yeb said to him.

Yes, Rhyden said, looking across the fire toward the shaman. He nodded. *Yes, for a week, if not more.*

“They are trying to hide themselves from us,” Yeb said aloud. “Targutai Bokedei, the boy-Kagan of the Khahl has a very strong idugan—a female shaman—at his disposal named Khidyr Shriagal. Her utha suldu, Vachir has guided several shamans for the Duuajin clan Kagans for many generations, and Khidyr has formidable hiimori. She has cast a spell, a ritual called dalda to hide them from us, give them the guise of crows within our minds, our visions. It is a strong spell she has bound them with—we can sense their approach, but we cannot see where they are, or how near they draw. Ogotai is anxious because they have come near to us already. I sensed thirteen strong spirits in the shifting wind two days ago. Their presence alarmed Ogotai—I suspect it was Khidyr Shriagal and her shaman circle trying to spy on us, using their combined hiimori to shield their efforts from me.”

“What happened, bugu Yeb?” Toghrul asked. He reached instinctively for his scimitar, closing his fingers about the hilt without being aware of the movement. “Did they see us? Do the Khahl realize where we are?”

“They saw us,” Yeb said grimly, and then his face softened as he turned to Rhyden again. “But only for a moment—not long enough to realize where we are, I think. Rhyden's utha endur dispatched them.”

“Trejaeran?” Rhyden asked, wide-eyed. He had not had a sense of Trejaeran for several days within him, except for the dream of the palace. There had been a fleeting moment two days earlier when he had thought he felt his friend's presence, like a swift

burst of wind rustling his hair, and then it had been gone. He had thought it was only his imagination.

“The endur got rid of thirteen shaman spirits?” asked one of the Oirat named Sokhor. He was puffing on a small, stone pipe, and he turned to Rhyden, snorting out a smart stream of smoke through his nose, his brows raised, his expression impressed.

“Bugger me,” Temu said from Rhyden’s left. He sat close to Rhyden, munching on his supper, and stared up at Rhyden, his eyes round and amazed. Rhyden glanced at Aigiarn, wincing visibly. Considering the term *bugger* was Torachan slang, the swear was likely not something the Oirat uttered by habit and there was only one place Temu might have picked it up. Rhyden found Aigiarn blinking at him, somewhat startled, and as her brows started to narrow in disapproval, he glanced down at Temu, feeling color stoke in his cheeks.

“Do not say that, Temu,” he said quietly.

Temu looked at him, innocently perplexed. “Why not?”

“Because it is not very nice,” Rhyden said.

“But you say it,” Temu said. “All of the time, Rhyden.”

“Never mind that, Temu,” Toghrul said, coming to Rhyden’s rescue and awarding a dark glance that appropriately mortified Rhyden. “It is a wicked Torachan phrase. Do not say it anymore.”

His tone was somewhat admonishing, and Temu blinked at him for a bewildered moment before nodding. “Teyimu, Toghrul,” he said. Yes.

“Rhyden’s utha endur rid us of the Khidyr Shriagal and her shamans for the time being, but not the Khahl,” Yeb said. He looked up again, gazing toward the clouds. “They are out there somewhere. They know we are moving, and I do not doubt that they know why.” He turned to Aigiarn. “They will try to stop us.”

“Let them,” Aigiarn said, her brows furrowed. “We will lose them in the mountains. They do not have our map. They do not know the way. They will get lost among the Khar, and they will freeze to death. If Rhyden’s endur spirit is protecting us from their sight, they cannot follow us.”

“I have had dreams about crows, too,” Temu said quietly, looking between Rhyden and Yeb. “Two nights ago, I dreamed of them at the Uru’ut aysil, at Qoyina Bay. They were everywhere, hundreds of them.”

Aigiarn blinked at him, stricken. “Oyotona, why did you not say something before now?” she asked.

“I thought it was a dream, Mamma,” he said. “I did not know Yeb and Rhyden could see them, too. I thought I dreamed of the Uru’ut aysil because you sent them word to meet us.”

Aigiarn’s breath tangled in her throat, and she met Toghrul’s alarmed gaze. “The Khahl could not have found the Uru’ut aysil,” she said. “I do not believe it—I cannot. It is not possible. They could stumble around those foothills and forests for weeks and never come upon them.”

“But if they did, Aigiarn—” Toghrul began, his hand tightening against the hilt of his sword.

“They did not,” Aigiarn insisted, but there was more fear in her voice than conviction. “They could not have...could they, Yeb?” She turned to the shaman, pleading.

“I do not know, Aigiarn,” Yeb said.

“What do you mean, you do not know?” Toghrul said, rising to his feet. He curled his hands into fists and glared at Yeb. “You are our yeke shaman. If anything had happened to the Uru’ut— our friends and kin, our people—if the Khahl had found their aysil, how could you not have seen it? How could Ogotai not have shown it to you?”

“Toghrul, I am not the Tengri,” Yeb said, looking up at him. “I cannot see all, and neither can Ogotai.”

Toghrul’s eyes flashed angrily. “Then what of the Elf?” he demanded, thrusting his finger at Rhyden. “What of his hiimori—this endur spirit you say protects him? It is stronger than you. He is stronger than you, or so you keep telling us.” He turned to Rhyden. “Did you see this? Did you know of it and keep it to yourself? Did the Khahl attack our people?”

“I...I do not know,” Rhyden said.

“Toghrul, leave him alone,” Aigiarn said.

“You are full of prophecies and visions, are you not, Elf?” Toghrul said. “First, you would keep us from going into the mountains by telling us you cannot read the map—by telling me if we go, Temuchin will die...”

Aigiarn blinked at Rhyden, visibly recoiling at this. Yeb turned to Rhyden, as well, his brow arching sharply; here was a revelation neither Rhyden nor Toghrul had mentioned.

“And now, all at once, you want us to go into the mountains—tengeriin boshig, you shall lead us to the lair yourself!” Toghrul snapped at Rhyden. “For nearly two weeks, all we have heard from bugu Yeb is how powerful you are, how great your hiimori is, how strong your utha suld is. It can dispatch the spirits of thirteen shamans, but it cannot tell you if a simple Uru’ut aysil has been attacked?”

He turned to Aigiarn, his brows furrowed. “I do not trust this man,” he said. “We know nothing about him, Aigiarn, and you have welcomed him into our company with open arms as though he was familiar to you. Have you not thought of why he would change his mind? Why he wants to go with us now? He told me Temu would die if we took him into the Khar—maybe that is what he wants. Maybe he is working with the Khahl. He is a Torachan official, part of the empire. He moves through the trees like he has been trained among the hoyin’irgen. He walks softly over the ground like he has lived among Ulusians all of his life. Maybe he has—among the Khahl, Aigiarn, and all along, it has been a trick, something their shamans designed to fool bugu Yeb—to fool us all into leading Temuchin to his death!”

“That is not true,” Rhyden said, standing. Temu stared up at him, wide-eyed and stricken, frightened by Toghrul’s angry voice, his sharp words. Rhyden looked at him, and then toward Yeb and Aigiarn. “It is not true—by my breath, it is not. I would not betray you. I have not betrayed you.”

Aigiarn stared at him, her eyes wide and still shocked. Her faith in him had suddenly wavered—more than that, it had been severed like a blade drawn against a taut line. He could sense it in her mind. Toghrul’s words made sense to her; they made a strange sort of sense to Rhyden, too, in the listening—save he knew the bloody damn truth. Aigiarn doubted him all at once, and her heart and mind filled with uncertainty and

fear. One swift glance around the group of Oirat about the fire proved the others shared in her trepidation, her suspicion.

Mother Above, it is the bloody damn a'Maorga all over again, he thought, dismayed. Unlike aboard the *a'Maorga*, however, this was Toghrul standing against Rhyden—a lean, strong man, swift and nimble as any Elf, and not some inebriated, paunchy sailor. Rhyden had not been intimidated by Nimon Hodder or his fellows because he had known he could best them if the matter came to blows; he remembered all too well Toghrul's agility, his speed as he had chased Rhyden among the pine trees, and he did not share that same confidence now.

"If you do not believe me, send me back," he said to Aigiarn. His voice trembled with helpless despair, and he locked his eyes with her, pleading with his gaze. Had there been a time only months ago when he had negotiated mining and trade contracts between two powerful nations with the calm aloofness one might use to comment on the weather? He could not imagine it now. "I am not lying to you, Aigiarn, and I would never—ever—hurt Temu. But if you do not believe me, send me back to Capua, like you had planned, like you told me this morning. Send me back, go on without me."

"Why? So you can tell the imperial Senate what you know of the map?" Toghrul said. "So you can lead them to the lair while we are well underway to a gruesome death lost in the mountains? How do we know he has translated the map truly? How do we know he has not learned where it leads and given us a false course to follow instead?"

"Because he said he would go with us!" Temu cried, springing to his feet. His eyes glistened with tears, but his hands closed into fists, and he furrowed his brows at Toghrul. "He is not trying to hurt us, Toghrul—he is trying to help us! Mamma did not make him go with us into the mountains. He asked to go. He wants to go. Why would he do that if he meant for us to die?"

Toghrul blinked at him, startled by his vehement, poignant protest. "Temu," he said, his fists loosening, his expression softening. He reached for Temuchin. "Ko'un, listen to me—"

"Some visions are not meant for more than one to see," Temu said, and he stumbled backward, shrugging away from Toghrul's hand. "Yeb told me that. He could not see the knarrs at Qoyina Bay when I dreamed of them. He could not see the thirty

thousand dorotus in Capua. Yeb has more hiimori than I do, but he did not see those things. He was not supposed to—just like he and Rhyden were not supposed to see the crows at the Uru’ut aysil. Father shows me things—only me; things no one else can see. I do not get to see him or hear him, like Rhyden and Yeb do their uthas, so that is how I know Father is real, that he is with me. He shows me things that are meant just for me! Tell him, Yeb. Please tell him I am right!”

Yeb stood from across the fire. He regarded Toghrul, his face stern, his brows drawn. “You are right, Temuchin. That is Yesugei’s gift to you. It always has been.”

Temuchin looked up at Toghrul. “Rhyden is our friend,” he said. “I trust him. I believe in him. You are angry with him because of what Mamma said about the smiles—not because you believe in your heart that he has betrayed us.”

Aigiarn jerked at this, her shoulders shuddering slightly, and she looked between her son, Toghrul and Rhyden, as if startled and abashed by Temuchin’s comment. “Temu, that is enough.”

“But, Mamma—” Temu began.

“I said enough,” Aigiarn told him firmly. “Sit down now. All of you. Toghrul, sit down. Juchin should be here in the morning. If the aysil is alright, he will be here. We will wait and see if he comes.”

“And if the Khahl come instead?” Toghrul asked her.

She met his gaze evenly. “Then we will hide from them, as we have done for ten thousand years. We will take to the mountains, and we will hide. There will be no more talk of it tonight—from any of you. Finish your suppers and tuck into your pallets. Either way, it will be a long day tomorrow. Nakhu, you and Jelmei take the first watch. It is a cold night. Keep the fire tended.”

She turned on the heel of her guta and stomped away, her furs wrapped about her, her shoulders hunches against the pervasive chill. She walked toward the beach, snow crunching beneath her boots, low-hanging pine boughs rustling against her hat, her blankets.

Toghrul spared one last glower at Rhyden and then turned, meaning to follow her. As he tromped past Yeb, the shaman reached out, closing his hand firmly against Toghrul’s arm.

“Take your hand from me, Yeb,” Toghrul said in a low voice, shrugging his shoulder.

“She is upset,” Yeb told him. “Leave her be. Let her tend to things in her own way.”

“Are those words of advice?” Toghrul asked. “Or a vision only meant only for one, Yeb?” He started to move past the shaman again, his brows drawn, and Yeb’s hand shot out, his palm planting firmly against Toghrul’s breast.

“I said leave her be, bahadur,” Yeb said. “Your rash temper and tongue have caused her heart enough grief tonight.”

Toghrul stared at him, and Yeb lifted his chin, meeting the other man’s gaze. Toghrul might have been noyan of his tribe, but Yeb was a yeke shaman and as such, held higher influence and authority among the Oirat. After a long moment, Toghrul conceded begrudgingly, jerking himself away from Yeb’s hand. “You heard the Khanum, Nakhu,” he said, glancing out of the corner of his eye toward his men. “You and Jelmei prepare the fire for first watch. Ajinal, you and Uha go down to the beach. Keep your eyes on the water for any approach. The rest of you to sleep.”

“Teyimu, bahadur,” the Oirat said, their quiet voices overlapping together as they all averted their gazes to their boots or the remnants of their supper. Yes.

Rhyden sat quietly by the fire, his eyes on the blaze as the Kelet and Uru’ut went about preparing for bed. One by one, the Oirat left the fire, ducking beneath the boughs and canopies of their shelters and finding places for themselves, curled together like litters of pups on pallets of blankets and furs against the ground. They remained suspicious of Rhyden, despite Temu’s fervent defense. Rhyden had not needed the sight to know this; it was apparent in their guarded glances, their wary regard as they had left the fireside. Toghrul retreated to the far corner of one lean-to, skulking like a surly cat. He lay on his side with his back to the campfire, drew his furs over his head and said nothing further.

Temu sat beside Rhyden, making no effort to move for a long time. As he watched the Oirat retire to the shelters, he reached out, draping his hand against Rhyden’s.

“I am sorry, Temu,” Rhyden said softly, stricken.

“It is not your fault, Rhyden,” Temu said, looking up at him. Rhyden averted his gaze, looking down at the ground, his expression forlorn and unhappy. Temu closed his fingers against Rhyden’s hand. “It will be alright,” he whispered.

He drew his arms about Rhyden, tucking his face against the socket of his shoulder as he hugged him fiercely. After a startled, uncertain moment, Rhyden shifted his weight, wrapping his arm around Temu’s shoulders.

“I would never hurt you,” he breathed. He closed his eyes and turned his face down toward the top of Temu’s cap, his lips brushing against the burlagh fur as he spoke. “You, or your mother, Temu...your people. I...I could never...”

“I know,” Temu said. “Toghrul is wrong. You did not ask for this, any of it. It is not your fault.” He looked up at Rhyden. “Did you really see that I will die?” he whispered, his voice tremulous with fear. “Did Trejaeran show that to you?”

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” Rhyden said, cradling Temu’s face between his palms. He leaned down so that his forehead pressed against the boy’s. “I will not let anything hurt you. I promise, Temu.”

“Is that why you said you would go with us into the mountains?” Temu whispered. “You want to keep me from dying?”

“You are not going to die,” Rhyden told him. He lifted his chin and pressed his lips against Temu’s brow. “I promise you—by my breath, all that is in me, nothing will happen to you. I will keep you safe.”

He let the boy go and Temu sat back from him. “I know you will,” he said softly, and he smiled. “I should talk to Toghrul. He is angry. He does not understand.”

“I am sorry,” Rhyden said again.

Temu rose to his feet, keeping his fingers coiled about Rhyden’s. “It is not your fault, Rhyden.” He slipped his hand loose and turned, walking around the fire toward the lean-to where Toghrul rested.

Rhyden remained by the fire, drawing his blankets further about his shoulders. His mind was distant, distracted by forlorn thoughts, and he did not even notice Yeb come to sit beside him, lowering himself quietly against the ground, his legs folded beneath him.

“Sometimes, no matter our age or experience, it is within the words of children that true wisdom can be found,” Yeb said, startling Rhyden. He jumped, his eyes flying wide as he turned to the shaman. Yeb smiled kindly at him. “Toghrul upset you,” he said. “I am sorry.”

“Toghrul only said what he did because he is worried,” Rhyden said. “Worried for your friends, the Uru’ut, and Temu. Maybe he is not so wrong. If something happened to them, I should have seen it. I do not understand why Trejaeran did not show it to me.”

“Toghrul said what he did because he does not possess hiimori, nor does he understand it,” Yeb told him. “It is easy for him to tell you what you should or should not have seen. No one has the power to see everything—and we have never been meant to. We are shown what we need to see, and nothing more. What is revealed to us—or not—is beyond any measure of our control.”

“I am sorry I did not tell you about my premonition about Temu,” Rhyden said. “It was not a vision, or Trejaeran’s voice telling me. It was just something that came to me. I thought...like Toghrul thought...surely if it was something that would come to pass that you would see it.”

“Sometimes, those things that come to us through our hiimori are not meant to tell us what will be, but to tell us of the future’s possibilities if we do not make choices to see it changed,” Yeb said. “There is nothing eternal or unchanging—not even destiny. Even carvings cut deeply in stone can be altered with time, wind and weather. A solitary raindrop can unleash a mountainslide. A single moment’s decision can likewise shift the course of fate—for ourselves and those around us.”

“You think I was meant to sense that,” Rhyden said. “You think that it helped me choose to come with you, to keep Temu safe.”

“I think that you are meant to be with us, Rhyden,” Yeb said, smiling again. “But I have never expected you to share in my certainty. You needed to find it for yourself.”

“The others do not feel that way—that I am meant to be here,” Rhyden said, looking toward the lean-tos. “They do not trust me anymore.”

“They did not trust you to begin with,” Yeb told him pointedly, and when Rhyden glanced at him, his brow arched, Yeb laughed. Rhyden smiled with him and shook his

head. Yeb clapped him fondly on the shoulder. “And they will not have much choice but to trust you come tomorrow morning, when we head into the mountains.”

“Did the Khahl attack the Uru’ut camp?” Rhyden asked. Yeb and Temu had both told him a great deal about the Khahl, and the bitter, ages-old rivalry between the two peoples. He knew from their descriptions that the Khahl were vicious in their attacks, killing Oirat indiscriminately and stealing countless others for sale upon slave blocks in the Ulusian capital city of Kharhorin, and throughout the empire. “Are they coming, Yeb?”

“I do not know, Rhyden,” Yeb replied. “I have asked Ogotai to show me, but he cannot. Or will not. It seems this is one of those visions I am not meant to see. But I know that if the Khahl have sent their Minghan troops to follow us, they could not have sent many without the Torachans in Kharhorin noticing. They would never take such a risk. Kagan Targutai Bokedei and his mother, the Queen, Yisun Goyaljin want to find the lair—to claim it for themselves—as much as we do. They would not want the empire to learn of their intentions. Juchin Batuqan, the noyan of the Uru’ut is a brave man, and a skilled warrior. His people are few, but strong and fierce. They can defend themselves against the Khahl. They have done so for millennia.”

“Toghrul is worried for them,” Rhyden said. “Aigiarn, too.” His gaze drifted to the trees, into the darkness beyond the circumference of firelight, where Aigiarn had walked away. She had not yet returned, and Rhyden’s brows drew slightly, troubled.

“The Uru’ut will be here in the morning if they are able. Do not worry for that.”

Rhyden looked at him for a long moment. “You must be very disappointed, Yeb,” he said. “Some divine guide I am turning out to be.”

“I cannot judge your skills as a guide one way or the other, not yet at least,” Yeb said, rising to his feet. He tapped the side of his nose with the tip of his forefinger; this was the Oirat equivalent of dropping a wink, and Rhyden smiled again, despite himself. “But I trust you, Rhyden, and believe in you. I am grateful that Keiden brought you to us—as I know Temuchin is.”

“Thank you for that,” Rhyden told him, looking up at the shaman.

Yeb smiled at him kindly, holding his furs about his chest as he turned to walk away. “You are welcome.”

“Do not be angry, Toghrul,” Temu said. He had picked his way around the Kelet and Oirat beneath the hide canopy to reach the corner where Toghrul lay. He had curled onto his side next to Toghrul, snuggling against him, and when Toghrul rolled over to face him, he pressed his forehead against the man’s shoulder.

He felt Toghrul’s hand settle against the side of his head, Toghrul’s lips press softly against his hat. “I am not angry, ko’un,” he said softly. “I did not mean to shout, to frighten you. I am worried, that is all.”

“Maybe my vision was wrong,” Temu whispered. “Maybe it was just a dream, Toghrul, and it does not mean anything at all. The Uru’ut aysil—”

“It does not matter, Temu,” Toghrul told him gently. “Even if the Khahl did attack them, there was nothing we could have done to prevent it. I was wrong to speak so sharply to bugu Yeb, your Mamma...and the Elf, and I will apologize to them.”

“Rhyden will not hurt us, Toghrul,” Temu said, looking up, meeting Toghrul’s gaze. “He will not betray us. I know he will not.”

“I know you believe that,” Toghrul said, stroking his palm against Temu’s cheek. “I suppose that will have to be good enough for me, hm?”

He did his best to smile for Temu, and the boy did his best to smile back. He knew it was hard for Toghrul. When Yesugei had died, along with all of the Oirat’s royal clann, it had fallen upon his shoulders to take care of their people. Aigiarn was their leader, but it was often Toghrul who struggled the most to keep the last Oirat tribes together and safe; Toghrul who traveled frequently to make certain they had food and shelter; Toghrul who led their Kelet warriors in defense against Khahl and Torachan raids. All of his life had been spent this way; he did not know any differently. While Aigiarn could sometimes be single-minded in purpose, particularly when the matter came to Temuchin and the search for the dragons’ lair, Toghrul struggled to put the welfare of his people—the four tribes of the Oirat—before any of his own personal desires or ambitions.

Temu knew he had frightened Toghrul by mentioning his dream of the Uru’ut aysil. Toghrul had lashed out at Rhyden because it was in his nature; he had lost many

friends and loved ones to the Khahl and Torachan forces and he did not trust anyone who was not an Oirat.

“When you live long enough knowing nothing but fear and mistrust, it is difficult to find room in your heart and mind for anything else,” Yeb had told Temu once. Temu had thought that this summed up Toghrol fairly well.

Toghrol was worried about the Uru’ut, and troubled about Aigiarn, too. Temu had overheard them talking last night aboard the knarr, before he had crept to the stern and assumed his customary habit of snoozing next to Rhyden. They had both thought he was asleep beneath his blankets and furs. They had spoken in quiet voices, their faces tucked close together, but he had heard them anyway.

“I do not trust him, Aigiarn,” Toghrol had said, and Temu had known they were discussing Rhyden.

“I know, Toghrol,” she had said in a gentle voice.

“We do not know what he is capable of, what his motives are,” Toghrol said. “He could—”

“He is capable of reading the map,” Aigiarn said. “And his motives are that he wants to go back to Capua, back to his ship.”

Toghrol snorted softly. “We will be at Tolui Bay tomorrow, and he does not have half of the map translated yet,” he said. “Some falcon he has proven to be. We could wander around the Khar blindfolded and find our way to the lair faster than this.”

“He has worked hard on the map,” Aigiarn said.

“But he has not finished it,” Toghrol said. “Are we supposed to set up aysil at Tolui for the next two weeks and wait for him?”

“He will finish it,” Aigiarn said, making Toghrol snort again. Her voice had grown aggravated at this. “He will. He said that he would, and I trust him at that.”

“I do not,” Toghrol said. “And I do not like Temu spending so much time with him, either—or Yeb. It is not safe.”

“Yeb is helping Rhyden read the map. It is written in riddles, and sometimes the answers lie in the Ulusian names for mountain passes and landmarks. I do not think it is such a bad thing at all that Yeb spends so much time with him—or Temuchin, either. They have made him feel at ease around us.”

“He might work faster if he was ill-at-ease,” Toghrul muttered.

“I think he is lonely,” Aigiarn said softly.

“He would be less lonely—and back around his own kind—if he would finish the map.”

“I do not mean lonely for his people,” she said, and Temu listened to the rustling of blankets as she rolled away from Toghrul. She faced the back of Temu’s head now, and he could feel the warmth of her breath against the nape of his neck as she spoke. “I mean alone,” she said, her voice soft. “As though he is haunted by things he cannot bear to recall, but does not dare to forget. I can see it in his eyes sometimes...when he thinks no one is looking and I know how that feels.”

She was murmuring more to herself than to Toghrul. She had not even realized that her words had hurt him, stung him like a resounding slap across the face, but Temu had known. He had heard the soft, wounded intake of Toghrul’s breath, and felt the weight of his silence that had followed.

“The way he looks at Temu, even the way he smiles at him...it is as though Temu draws him out, chases that burden from his heart, or some pain from his mind for awhile,” Aigiarn said softly. She was smiling; Temu could hear it in her tone and knew it with certainty, even without seeing her. Aigiarn was smiling gently, her gaze distant, her face softened. “When he smiles at Temu, that sorrow lifts from him, and he is beautiful for it.”

Temu did not know exactly why, but he knew this comment had pained Toghrul all the more, and that this was part of the reason he had been so angry with Rhyden. It was not anything necessarily that Rhyden had done; it had been Aigiarn’s comment about his smile, that something about it had touched her, moved her in a tender way Toghrul had not been able to despite many long years of earnest effort.

I am sorry Mamma hurt you, Temu thought, looking into Toghrul’s face, seeing the pain yet shadowed in his eyes. *She did not mean it, Toghrul.*

“It is a cold night, ko’un,” Toghrul said to him, brushing his gloved fingertips against Temuchin’s cheek. “You should lie closer to the fire, where it is warm.”

“Can I stay here with you instead, Toghrul?” Temu asked.

Toghrul blinked at him, and then he smiled. "Of course you can, Temu," he said. He shifted a bit, drawing his furs from beneath him and holding them up with his hand. Temuchin wriggled closer to him, and Toghrul lowered the blankets, tucking them about them both.

"I am sorry I spoke disrespectfully to you," Temu said.

Toghrul chuckled, his voice rumbling softly beneath his chest. "You did not," he said. "I was rather proud of you for it, ko'un, to tell the truth."

Temu blinked at him. "You were?"

Toghrul nodded. "You stood up like a man," he said. "That takes courage. You reminded me very much of your father."

"Really?" Temu asked, his eyes widening.

"Teyimu, Temu," Toghrul said, smiling at him. Yes.

"Bi chamd khairtai, Toghrul," Temu whispered, closing his eyes and tucking his cheek against Toghrul's heart, listening to its soft measure through the lined layers of his del. *I love you*. He slipped his arm about Toghrul's ribs, hugging him. "I am glad you are with me."

"Urgulji, minu ko'un," Toghrul said softly, kissing his pate. *Always, my son*.

Rhyden woke with a start, his breath tangled in his throat, his eyes flying wide as a hand fell against his shoulder. He had curled onto his side and fallen asleep by the fire, his mind filled with restless, confusing dreams and then someone had touched him, rousing him from sleep, startling him wide awake. He jerked, sitting nearly upright and drawing his legs beneath him and he blinked in bewilderment to find Aigiarn genuflected near him.

"A...Aigiarn...?" he asked, his voice hoarse. He looked about, wide-eyed and dazed, half-expecting to find Toghrul nearby, poised and ready to throttle him.

"I want to talk to you," Aigiarn said. She met his gaze, as was her habit, her expression stoic, her brows crimped slightly. She regarded him coolly, warily, as one might a dog that had been friendly at first, but then had nipped unexpectedly, drawing blood.

He knew why she wanted to talk to him; Toghrul's words had stricken Aigiarn, his grim revelations and suspicions had weighed heavily on her heart. Rhyden did not know what Aigiarn might say, what she had decided to do about the whole matter, but he suspected he was about to find out. "Alright," he said quietly, nodding and running his fingers through his hair, mopping it back from his brows. She rose gracefully to her feet, and he stood clumsily beside her, stumbling in place over the long, draped hems of his blankets.

"Come with me," Aigiarn said, cutting her eyes briefly between the lean-tos filled with snoozing Oirat, and the two young men who sat near the campfire, keeping the watch.

Rhyden nodded again, and followed her as she walked toward the trees. The moment he stepped away from the bright, blazing heat of the fire, he felt the bitter, biting air of the winter night slap against his skin, drawing the breath from him. He drew his furs about him more tightly, ducking his head to avoid low-hanging, snow-laden boughs as he walked.

She stopped in a small clearing among the trees when she felt they had traipsed far enough away from the camp to avoid any eavesdropping. She turned to him, her brows yet drawn, her expression stern. He remembered his mother, Treines looking at him like that when he had been a boy and she had caught him at something he was not supposed to be doing. Now, as then, he felt appropriately rebuked by the glare alone, and he blinked at her, shivering beneath his blankets, miserable and unhappy.

"I am not an ignorant barbarian," she told him. "I know you think that I am—that we all are ignorant barbarians, but we are not."

"I do not think that," he told her softly.

"I am not some heartless savage who would drag my only son into the mountains to die while we chase legends and stories," she said.

"I do not think that, either," Rhyden said. *Not anymore*, he thought. He had come to realize this about her more than anything else. Aigiarn was determined; she was stubborn and persistent, but she also loved Temu. She loved him as though he was the only certainty in her life, and more so than any legend or prophecy, she believed in her son.

“My people have waited ten thousand years for Temuchin’s birth,” Aigiarn said. “Ten thousand years to have this moment. Temu’s destiny—the Oirat’s destiny—has been promised for millennia, and we have suffered to be here, struggled to survive because we knew that this day would come, that we would one day be led to the lair.”

“I know, Aigiarn,” Rhyden said.

“I would give it up in a breath,” Aigiarn said, walking toward him. “I would abandon that destiny—I would throw away all of those centuries of sacrifice and struggle without a solitary thought, or a moment of regret if I thought any harm would come to Temu for it.” She stood in front of Rhyden, close enough for him to realize tears shimmered in her eyes. She balled her hands into defiant fists and lifted her chin to meet his gaze. “Temuchin is everything that I have. There is nothing between sky, earth and spirit that means more to me. I would die before I let anything happen to my son.”

“Aigiarn, I would not hurt him,” Rhyden said. He wanted to tell her he could not lie; it was inherent in his nature, but he knew it would be moot. Most menfolk—to whom lying and deceit came readily and easily—could not comprehend of this aspect of Elfin character, much less believe it possible. “I know what Toghrul said seems like logic to you, but I promise—I swear to you, Aigiarn—I could never hurt Temuchin. I would not betray him, or you. I know you do not know me...do not believe me, but please—whatever you want to know, ask me of it. I will tell you gladly if it will make you trust me, believe me at my word. By my breath, I will.”

Her brows lifted, her stern expression softening at his words. “Did you have a vision that said Temu would die?” she asked him softly. “Is that true? Did you tell Toghrul that?”

“I do not know what it was,” he said. “I did not see it in my mind. I felt it. I looked at Temu on that first morning...when I woke up on the knarr, and I thought it. I felt it.”

Aigiarn blinked against her tears and turned away from him, her brows furrowing, her hand darting toward her mouth as she uttered a fragile, ragged breath. “No,” she whispered, shaking her head, the thick plait of her hair swinging against the furs swathed about her. “No, it cannot happen like that. It is not supposed to happen like that.”

“Aigiarn, I am sorry,” Rhyden said. Her pain and terror were apparent, and he reached for her, placing his hands against her shoulders. She wrenched herself away from his grasp, whirling toward him, her eyes flashing hotly.

“Do not touch me,” she said.

“Please,” he said, holding out his hands to her. “What I saw...what I felt...that does not mean it will come to pass. Yeb told me sometimes we are shown things that could happen, a possible future—something we can change. He said I could choose to make it different.”

She looked at him, her eyes round, glossy with tears. “What are you supposed to choose?” she asked him softly.

“To go with you,” he said. “To go into the mountains, to help you find the lair. Yeb said I am supposed to be here, with you. He has said that all along, but I have not believed him. Maybe at first, I did think you chased legends, that you were bringing Temu into great risk, but I do not any longer.”

He touched her shoulder, and this time, she did not pull away. “I do not think that anymore, Aigiarn,” he said again. “The spirit that guides me...what you call my endure...was my friend when he was alive. My dearest friend, the best I have ever known. When he died, I tried to save him. I tried to prevent it, but I was too late. I failed him.”

Rhyden looked down at the snow-covered ground, hanging his head as shamed tears stung his eyes. Until recently, he had spoken very little of Trejaeran, because the memories of his friend—even the mention of his name—had still brought profound pain to him. He had never confided his feelings of failure, of culpability in Trejaeran’s death to anyone before, not even to Qynh; he had scarcely been able to admit them within the sanctuary of his own mind. “If I had only been a moment sooner,” he whispered. “Just a moment...just a broad stride faster, maybe two, I could have saved him. He ran himself through with a sword because he was afraid, and I could have stopped him. I could have told him it would be alright, that I would keep him safe. I held his hand as his breath waned, and as I watched him die, he told me ‘the measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds.’ That moment marked my measure—I have never forgiven myself for failing him.

“The woman I told you about this morning, Qynh...I failed her, too. I have loved her in secret for fifteen years. I hid myself in my work in Capua and I wrote letters to her, too much of a coward to stand before her and tell her I loved her. She is another man’s wife—she is married to my friend, and I have no right to love her. I made myself stay away, told myself it was what was right to do, noble somehow. But the truth was that I was afraid of people after Trejaeran died. Something within me died with him, and I did not want to feel that loss again, that pain. I kept from Qynh because I was afraid, and during those years, when I was gone, someone hurt her. I could have stopped it, prevented it had I been there, but like Trejaeran, I failed her, too.”

Aigiarn held his gaze, even as a tear slipped from the corner of her eye, trailing down the curved slope of her cheek.

“I am meant to be here, Aigiarn,” he whispered. “Everything that has happened these past weeks...it has been leading me to this, whether I wanted it or not. I am meant to go with you, and what I sensed...what I thought...it was meant to make me realize that, to find my purpose in all of this, to understand. This is my chance to set things right, for Trejaeran...for Qynh. I could not protect them. I let myself fail them, but by my breath, Aigiarn, I will not fail Temuchin. Trejaeran told me that Temu is special—more special than I could realize. He told me Temu needs me. He needs me to lead him into the mountains.”

She turned her eyes away from him, pressing her lips together and staring off toward the trees beyond his shoulder. “He told you that?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” Rhyden said.

Aigiarn brought her hand to her face, wiping her solitary tear away with the tips of her fingers. “I have known Toghrul nearly my whole life,” she said. “He and my husband were as you and your friend—close enough in spirit and heart to have been brothers. When Yesugei died, Toghrul welcomed me among his tribe, his family, his home.” She met Rhyden’s gaze. “I trust him—and his instincts implicitly,” she said. “He has never led me wrong before.”

He blinked at her, stricken and hurt. When she reached for him, he flinched instinctively, wondering if she meant to slap him mightily across the face. Instead, she

cradled his cheek against her gloved palm, and when he looked at her in confusion, she smiled.

“But he is wrong about you,” Aigiarn said. She brushed her thumb lightly against the arch of his cheek, following the indigo line of his tattoo. “I do not know you. But I know my son. Your endur is right—Temu is special. I have always felt this, known it with certainty...trusted in it. Temu has found something within you that is decent and kind. I trust what he sees, what he senses and feels. I never said I do not believe you. Maybe at first, when Toghrul said Temu was in danger, I doubted you, but I have been thinking about it, and I knew the truth in my heart. I only needed to hear you say that Temu will be safe.”

“He will be safe, Aigiarn,” Rhyden told her. “I promise you—by all that I have.”

She smiled, her mouth unfurling in a lovely, curving measure. In that moment, as her customary shroud of melancholia and hardness lifted, he realized what a truly beautiful woman Aigarn was, and was nearly breathless for it.

“I believe you,” she said softly, drawing her hand away from his face.

Aigiarn lay on her side by the fire, gazing across the bed of coals, the smoldering logs as they yielded to embers, watching Rhyden sleep across from her. It had been more than an hour since they had returned to the camp together and she remained awake, her mind too restless for slumber. She was worried for the Uru’ut and anxious for the morning to come. She tried to reassure herself, but she would have fared better trying to command the clouds. Aigiarn knew all too well that though Temu’s visions sometimes did not make much sense at first, in the end, they were very seldom wrong. His dream of the Uru’ut aysil seemed to suggest they had been attacked by the Khahl, and she knew she would find no respite from her worries until Juchin and his men arrived and she could see with her own eyes that they were safe and well.

Rhyden had drifted off almost immediately, sleeping like a child, curled on his hip and shoulder, his knees drawn toward his chest, his hands toward his face. Aigiarn lay quietly beneath her blankets, watching the glow of the waning fire play in dancing light and shadows against his face, listening to the soft rhythm of his breath as he slept. She

wondered if he held counsel with Trejaeran in his dreams, the friend he so obviously loved and missed, or maybe the woman, Qynh, who held his heart to his shame.

Now I know why you seem so sad, she thought to herself, her heart filled with tender pity for him. *So lonely.*

She understood his heartache, his isolation, because it was her own. Yesugei's death, so horrific and unexpected had left a portion of her heart crippled with despair, with the same despondency that weighed upon Rhyden, the same sense of regret and failure, the overwhelming grief and shame.

"He lives in the world of the empire," she had told Yeb when Rhyden had only been among them for three days. Like Toghrul, at first, Aigiarn had not approved of the shaman's—or her son's—growing interest and seeming friendship with the Elf, and she had tried her best to discourage it. "A world of pale skin, rounded eyes and long noses; tall ships, immense cities, ridiculous clothes and pompous titles. He thinks we are ignorant. He thinks we are savages. He knows nothing of our world, and we know nothing of his. Leave him alone to read the map, and let us be rid of him, Yeb."

"His features are different than ours, and his flesh," Yeb had conceded. "His customs, his life. But his mind still works no differently than mine, Aigiarn—or yours, his heart no more or less capable of feeling joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain. It is not a man's form that grants him his measure. It is his heart. And here, Aigiarn, we are all judged the same."

As I watched him die, he told me 'the measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds,' Rhyden had told her, his words eerily similar to Yeb's. Rhyden's face had filled with dismay as he had said this, and at last, Aigiarn had understood the pain in his heart, the sorrow she had sensed within him aboard the knarr. *That moment marked my measure—I have never forgiven myself for failing him.*

You are wrong, she thought, watching Rhyden sleep. *I do not know much about your world, or the life you lead within it, but here, at least, in my regard, tonight has marked your measure.*

He murmured in his sleep, soft words she did not understand. His brows lifted slightly and he moved his hand, unfurling his fingers. Aigiarn reached out, stretching her arm around the edge of stones arranged about the fire, and when her hand brushed

against Rhyden's, he moved again, curling his fingertips lightly against hers, making her smile.

Chapter Ten

The longboat bearing Aedhir and the crewmen from the *a'Maorga* reached the Forks of Sube by midafternoon on the thirteenth day of their voyage. The pair of conjoined harbors led inland off of the northeastern corner of the Chagan Sea, into a cold and inhospitable landscape framed by snow-capped mountains, muddy beaches and frost-crustured forests.

They sailed through the narrow waterway between Lydia and the peninsula of Sube, spending much of the afternoon passing the broad mouth of Tolui Bay, heading east. The longer of the two harbors, Qoyina Bay hooked directly into Ulus; a natural boundary of water between the Taiga and Nuqut territories of the imperial state. Much of Qoyina's coast rested in the Nuqut region, where the Oirat lived. Since most of Qoyina's sister bay, the shorter, broader Tolui lay within Lydia, Aedhir had felt confident the Oirat would bring Rhyden to Qoyina instead.

By the time the sun began to set, they had passed Tolui Bay. Aedhir ordered the longboat aground on the shore of Sube to their north, at the mouth of Qoyina Bay's long, eastward branch. South of them was the Nuqut peninsula. So far, they had not discovered any signs of the Oirat stopping through the night. However, they had found plenty of evidence along their voyage to suggest the Oirat made landfall frequently: trough marks cleaved into the soft mud of exposed tidelines from the keel of the Oirat's boat and tracks left by boot soles in the snow and mud. Aedhir doubted they suspected pursuit, and knew they would feel safe now in waters that were likely familiar to them. If they were confident enough to perhaps stop for the night, set up a camp, he did not want to risk stumbling upon them in the dark.

Two days earlier, he had discovered a small ball made of hide panels stitched together, a small trinket or toy abandoned in the shallow water along one of the Oirat's stopping points. The ball had intrigued and troubled Aedhir. *Is there a child with them?* he had thought, cradling it against his gloved palm. They had observed diminutive footprints in various places where the Oirat had stopped, tracks that might have belonged to a child. *Why would they bring a child with them?*

Tacita had told Aedhir that a woman had been among the Oirat party; she had been the one to purchase Rhyden at the Capuan catasta. Aedhir suspected the trips ashore were to let her relieve herself—just as their stops allowed Tacita. *Maybe she brought her child with her*, he thought. *But why?*

His crew was excited by the prospect of making landfall, and sleeping off of the boat for once. Their enthusiasm was short-lived however, when Aedhir told them no campfires, no lanterns, nothing that might alert the Oirat to their presence. The sky was filled with low-hanging, heavy clouds that had been belching snowfall and sleet upon them for the last week. Smoke from a fire would be too easily visible at a distance, trapped against this downy ceiling; lantern light might be too readily seen from the Nuqut coast across the harbor.

The men settled themselves in for a cold, dank, uncomfortable night, grumbling to one another as they sat in the darkness, huddled together beneath blankets and chewing on a cold supper of dried meat and stale, brittle biscuits. Aedhir listened to them for awhile; they did not complain so readily when he was within earshot, and made light-hearted conversation for his benefit as they compared their beard growths.

It was a contest they had undertaken, a collaborative wager to see who among them could grow the fullest, longest chinful of hair the quickest. Nearly every man aboard the longboat now sported a bristled tangle of beard and mustache except for Wen, who had said somewhat sheepishly that he had never been able to grow one in full; Pryce, who shaved to keep Wen company—and the other men from ribbing him too much for not participating—and Aedhir, who disliked beards, and disliked wagering in contests he was not fully confident he could win. Facial hair was prohibited by Crown Navy policy, but considering their circumstances, Aedhir had allowed the friendly competition to commence.

Surprisingly, Odhran seemed to be winning. His beard and mustache had surpassed even Thierley's bushy growth. "My grandfather grew a beard down to his groin once," Odhran said, as the men sat together. The crewmen all murmured together at this, incredulous and impressed. Aedhir had consented to at least let them roll and smoke toitins, and Odhran tilted his furry chin back and blew out a smoke ring. He glanced toward Thierley, who had taught this little trick to him, and beamed—nearly

unseen beneath his beard—as Thierley nodded to him in approval. “All of us Frankley men, we have always been able to sprout a goodly beard.”

“Hoah, we all look like wild men—those rotted Enghan you are so fond of, Odhran,” said Euan Fancott with a laugh. He scratched at his own beard, hooking his fingers through the auburn hair to paw at his chin. “Pretty soon we shall all be marauding Lydian fishing villages, raping and plundering, burning houses down and murdering, just like they do.”

The others laughed at this; even Odhran cracked a smile and shook his head, well enough accustomed by now to their good-natured ribbing to remain unoffended. “Those are just stories, Euan,” he said. “The Enghan are not like that.”

“Stories, eh?” Prew Brumford arched his brow as he puffed on his pipe. “I have read accounts of it in the Cneasan gazettes. Even in Serdica, it makes the periodicals. Longboats filled with Enghan wild men sailing along the coast of Lydia, raiding as they go, stealing what they can and burning the rest.”

“Like you can bloody read, Prew,” laughed Deaglan Arles.

“Hoah, buggar off, Deag, you rot yob,” Prew said, affably.

“They print etchings and everything showing it,” Duffin Nevyne said. “I have seen them. Great big boats full of hairy men wearing animal hides like bloody savages, with swords as big as a man’s whole form, I seen.”

“Those are just stories,” Odhran said again. “Lydians used to trade with the Enghan. So did villages in northern Torach along the Chagan Sea. The empire makes those kinds of stories up to frighten people, keep them from trading anymore. The Abhacan were familiar with the Enghan tribes when they used to live in Lydia, when it was Tirgeimhreadh millennia ago. That is where most of what we know of the Enghan in Tiralainn comes from, and by Abhacan accounts, they are farmers and fishermen mostly.”

“Hoah, it is the part left after the *mostly* that you have to watch for,” said Jobin Dunster with a wink, drawing more laughter.

“The imperial gazettes say those Oirats are nothing but savages, too,” Duffin said. “And they do not seem so wrong on that account. Myself, I say the Enghan are

feral dogs. The empire ought to just pay Kierken what he wants to learn how to make an'dagas and isneachan from us, and bloody shoot the damn lot of them.”

“You are sitting on Enghan soil, Mister Nevyne,” Aedhir said quietly, drawing the men’s gazes, and their voices to silence. “I might watch the way my tongue wags if I were you.”

Duffin blushed, unseen in the shadows. He hunched his shoulders and nodded. “Uh...yes, sir,” he said. “Yes, Captain Fainne.”

As the topic of discourse moved on to less inflammatory topics, Aedhir canted his head and listened to Pryce and Wen’s quiet voices from beyond his left shoulder. The two were oblivious to the crewmen sitting nearby, absorbed in their own conversation, as was becoming fond habit for them.

“When were you born?” Pryce asked.

“November,” Wen said.

“Hoah, that makes you an a’Eala,” he said. “A winter sign, like me.”

“A what?”

“A winter sign. You were born under the mark of a’Eala. It means *swan*. It is a winter constellation. If the clouds were not so dense, I could probably show it to you. There are people who say our personalities are determined by the star signs of our birth month. Mine is a’lolar—*eagle*. It is a winter sign, too; I was born January thirteenth.”

“How can the stars say what our personality is like?” Wen asked, sounding dubious. He snorted, slapping Pryce’s arm. “You are lying, you rot. You are making that up.”

“I am not,” Pryce said with a laugh. “I read about it. It is an Elf practice, something the Mianach used. It is fairly accurate. The book I have says that a’lolaran are curious, intelligent and somewhat gullible, articulate with a tendency to speak their minds, capable of handling great responsibilities, introspective, emotive, with a penchant for self-deprecation. I would say that sums me fairly well.”

“I would have stopped with *curious*,” Wen said, and they laughed together. “What about me? What is an a’Eala like according to your book?”

“Free-spirited and strong-willed—imagine that,” Pryce said, grinning. “Purposeful of mind, stubborn as a farm mule. You are unafraid of challenges, and follow your heart.

You are confident, intelligent, opinionated but compassionate. You sort of bounce between being a pain in the ass and fairly pleasant.”

“You job,” Wen said, slapping him again. “How do you know all of this?”

“I told you—a book. I bought it in Tiralainn before we left.”

Aedhir smiled. While other crewmen and officers used time laid up on land to visit taverns and brothels, Pryce visited bookstores. Aedhir had taught him to read when he had taken custody of him as a boy. Pryce had an eager and voracious appetite for knowledge, and he had fairly well devoured every book Aedhir possessed in short measure. Pryce saved up his wages to buy books. He kept at least fifty of them tucked at all times throughout his stateroom aboard the frigate. Aedhir owned a small, four-room flat in Penmanshiel, a small parish near the Cuan’durach port in Tiralainn, and though they seldom stayed there long, it was filled with heaping boxes and crates of Pryce’s books. The topic or title did not matter to Pryce; he read everything from poetry to history, from literature to science—and all manner of subjects in between. Aedhir had tried to convince him to abandon the Navy and enroll in the Belgaeran University, but Pryce had grown somewhat sheepish at the suggestion.

“I am not smart enough for the university, Aedhir,” he had said, with a shrug. “I have read a few books here and there, that is all. I have never even been to school. Besides...” He had looked up, his blue eyes round and earnest. “I want to be a Naval Captain, like you. You do not need the university for that.”

Aedhir supposed Wen would further serve to strengthen this in Pryce’s mind, considering the younger man had abandoned his university studies for the sea, but Aedhir did not mind. Wen was a good lad, and his friendship and company were something Pryce had needed for a long time, and Aedhir was grateful for it.

Wen and Pryce had grown fairly inseparable, although Wen had approached Aedhir alone earlier that evening, when they had first come ashore and were setting up their campsite. Aedhir had been at work among the pine trees, kneeling in the snow and trying to rig a small lean-to so that Tacita would have a place to sleep comfortably. He was fashioning it out of fallen limbs, a pair of blankets and some twine, and Wen had come to stand quietly nearby, looking somewhat anxious and uncomfortable, his hands shoved deeply into the pockets of his great coat.

“Captain Fainne, sir...?” he had asked in a small, expectant voice.

Aedhir had been drawing a line of rope taut to secure the framework for his rudimentary tent in place. He glanced over his shoulder toward Wen, his brow arched. “Yes, lad, what is it?”

“I...” Wen had blinked at Aedhir, and then down at his boot toes. “May I help you with that, sir?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” Aedhir said, nodding toward a mallet that lay against the snow just beyond his arm’s reach. “You can hand me that mallet, if you would, Wen.”

“Yes, sir,” Wen said, seeming pleased—whether by Aedhir’s acceptance of his offer, or simply to have something to do, Aedhir did not know. The young man knelt, taking the hammer in hand and offering it to Aedhir. For the first time, Aedhir noticed how small Wen’s hands were. Wen was a small boy in general; he was tall, but very lean and wiry. Aedhir imagined he must have been picked on quite a bit growing up on account of his size.

Wen knelt in the snow beside Aedhir, watching as he looped the end of the line of rope around a small peg he had whittled quickly out of a hank of fallen wood. Aedhir had carved a tapered point into the end of the wood, and he used the mallet to driver the peg into the hard, frozen ground. It was tough work; the peg nearly split as Aedhir drove the hammer mightily, swinging with all of his might.

“May I talk to you, sir?” Wen asked quietly, and again Aedhir glanced at him.

“We are nearly out of daylight,” he said, raising his eyes briefly skyward. Dusk-draped shadows spilled down upon them. “I need to get this up while I can still see what I am doing. Can you talk while I work?”

Wen nodded, looking down at the ground. “I...yes, sir,” he said.

“Good, then,” Aedhir said, and he pressed the hammer between Wen’s hands. “Hold that for me.”

He stood and moved around to the other side of the tent frame. He took another length of twine and began looping it tightly around a long limb he had found to use as a crossbeam atop the canopy. When he had it fettered tautly in place, he genuflected, pulling it toward the ground, stretching the slack from the line. “There is another of those

pegs I made there,” he said, tapping his forefinger at the hunk of wood. “Will you hand it to me, please?”

“Yes, sir,” Wen said. He picked up the peg and passed it to Aedhir. “I...I have been wanting...meaning that is...to talk to you, Captain...for awhile now.”

“Is that so?” Aedhir asked, without looking up. “What about, lad?” He wound the free end of the rope around the nocked head of the peg, being careful not to let the line slip too loose, lest the crossbeam fall down on top of his head. In truth, he was only half-listening to Wen. He felt badly for this, because he did it willingly. He had nothing against Wen—liked the boy very well, in fact—and would have paid as much (or as little) attention to Pryce, even, had Pryce been the one talking. Aedhir was concentrating on his work, which was becoming increasingly difficult given the waning light.

“It...it has been on my mind,” Wen said, plucking at the folds of his great coat. “I should have told you sooner, but I did not know how. I still...I do not know if I...”

“You cannot go back to Tiralainn, Wen,” Aedhir told him, looking up and offering a quick smile. “Not at the moment, anyway.” He turned back to his work, and began hammering the peg into the ground. As he spoke, his words grunted out from his mouth with labored breaths. “If you want to when this is all behind us, I understand. These have hardly been ordinary or enjoyable circumstances. I will take you there myself—you and Odhran both, if you wish. I will write you both letters to see you honorably annulled from your duties to the Crown. If needs be, I will write something to see you both readmitted to the university. How is that?”

Wen blinked at him, and Aedhir could not account for his bewildered, unhappy expression. “I...I do not want to go back to Tiralainn,” he said. “I want to stay here, with you.”

“Oh,” Aedhir said, swinging the hammer down. The damn peg was splintering, he realized. The wood was damp and soft; the ground was frozen and like stone. One did not yield easily to the other, and he raised his hips to put more of his back into his swing. “What is it, then?”

“I...I just...” Wen began. His voice sounded nearly tremulous, as though he was on the verge of tears, and Aedhir looked at him, drawing the mallet back in his hand. Wen looked at him, stricken and imploring. “Captain Fainne, I...I am your—”

Aedhir swung the hammer down and squarely against his thumb. He yowled, dropping the hammer and clutching at his wounded hand, tears springing to his eyes. “Hoah—rotted pox and bloody well damn it!” he bellowed.

“Captain—!” Wen exclaimed, wide-eyed, reaching for him.

“Aedhir!” Pryce cried, rushing over. “Aedhir, are you alright?” He fell on his knees beside Aedhir, his eyes round and alarmed. Other crewmen hurried toward them as well, frightened by the sound of Aedhir’s yell.

“Hoah, damn it,” Aedhir said, huffing out a long breath. He opened his eyes and looked at his thumb, wiggling it experimentally. It hurt, but nothing so sharp and piercing as to indicate broken bones. It was going to leave a good bruise for certain and he could see blood welling in a thin line along his cuticle. He stuck his thumb in his mouth, sucking on it to stave the bleeding, and looked at Pryce. “I am alright,” he said, his voice lisping around his finger.

“What happened?” Pryce asked, wrapping his hands about Aedhir’s wrist, tugging. “Here, let me see. Does it hurt?”

“Of course it bloody hurts,” Aedhir said, frowning. “I whacked it with a rot damn hammer.” He shrugged his shoulder. “It is fine, Pryce. Nothing broken.”

“Swallow it down, sailor,” Thierley said from behind Pryce. “A little pain never hurt anyone. You are Crown Navy, not some simpering ninny.”

“Yes, thank you for that tender sentiment, Thierley,” Aedhir said, while Pryce and the other crewmen all began to laugh together. Aedhir laughed with them, shaking his head.

“You are old. You could hurt yourself. Stop worrying us like this,” Pryce told him, rising to his feet. He turned to Wen, smiling broadly. “Here you are. Come on, Wen. Sengel found a flask of brimague tucked at the bottom of his knapsack. He had forgotten about it, said he would share it.”

Wen glanced at Aedhir. Pryce obviously thought his friend’s troubled, stricken expression was because of Aedhir’s accident, and he smiled again, reaching down,

offering his hand to Wen. “Do not worry for him,” Pryce said. “He is like this. He caterwauls for a moment and then all is well.”

“I...but I...” Wen said, looking again toward Aedhir.

“We can talk later, Wen, if you do not mind,” Aedhir said. “Why do you not go on? I will finish here and be right behind you.”

“Al...alright,” Wen said, nodding. He slipped his palm against Pryce’s, letting Pryce draw him to his feet.

“Oh, and I happened to have found a pouch of minstral’s herb snuff at the bottom of my knapsack that I had forgotten,” Pryce said to Wen, draping his arm affably across Wen’s shoulders and leading him away. “Grown in the Apamean valley in Torach—the finest in all of the known Bith. Not enough to share with everyone, but plenty for you and me, Wen. Have you ever tried it?”

Wen had not approached Aedhir again to speak with him, and Aedhir had nearly forgotten about it as they sat around, talking into the night. As he pressed his fingertips absently together, and felt a twinge of pain ripple through his thumb, Aedhir remembered, and looked toward Wen. The young man was occupied talking to Pryce, laughing and smiling, seeming at ease. Aedhir figured whatever had been troubling Wen earlier, he must worked it out for himself.

Aedhir turned his head, pivoting on his hips to look over his right shoulder. Tacita had retreated beneath the lean-to he had made for her some time ago; he could make out her silhouetted form beneath the shadows of the overhanging canopy.

She had surprised him over the last two weeks. Women seldom surprised him anymore, but Tacita had. He had thought of her as somewhat meek and passive when he had first encountered her, but had come to realize since then that she was not so much timid as she had been in shock. She had told him she had been born to enslaved parents, but was raised and worked her entire life as a member of the sacerdotium for the imperial temple of the Mater Matris. Though by Tiralainnian standards, Tacita had been a prostitute for awhile, within the Torachan religion, she had held a very respectable and esteemed position during her time as a donarium paelex. She had spent the last ten years of her life as a member of the viatoris, or imperial missionaries. She had traveled throughout the Morthir, helping to establish temples, to convert pagan

practitioners to the Mater Matris faith and teaching the caerimonia and rituals of worship.

These years had been spent in the company of a man named Marcus Aurelius Aquila, a young popa, a temple servant, one of the lower-ranking clergy members in Tacita's temple at Euboea. He had been the man she had referred to as her "previous master" when Aedhir had first met her, although Marcus had been a fellow viatori, not her master. Marcus was a Median, like Aedhir's ancestors, and Aedhir supposed this accounted for why Tacita seemed to feel so comfortable around him. He likely reminded her in appearance of her friend; in fact, on one occasion, Tacita had even offered a fleeting and somewhat cryptic comment about how she had mistaken Aedhir at first at the Capuan catasta for Marcus. She had thought Marcus had come to find her.

Tacita was educated, literate, fluent in five languages, and she had never known of the hardships and horrors of her slave birthright until very recently. She had never worn a tattoo until she had been brought to Mongo Boldry's catasta and being sold on the auction block—along with the horrifying realization of the boorish intentions of the man who had originally purchased her—had left her nearly reeling with stunned fright. Tacita had lived, for all intents and purposes, the life of a free and affluent woman in Torachan society. What she had done to merit banishment to Capua, and such a cruel fate as the catasta remained a mystery to Aedhir. She had shared many things freely with him along their voyage, but this she had not spoken of and he had never asked her.

She was beautiful; her features and form reminded him of gardenia blossoms—pale and delicate, deliberately yet softly shaped. Tacita was without doubt, one of the loveliest women Aedhir had ever seen. This fact was not lost upon his crewmen—nor was the apparent friendship that had been fostering between the two since embarking for the Chagan Sea. Aedhir and Tacita spent a great deal of time in conversation together, and the men drew their own inferences from this.

"Are you laying with her?" Pryce had asked Aedhir quietly several days earlier. He had drawn Aedhir aside, speaking to him in a low voice, his expression troubled.

Aedhir smirked. "There would be a feat, given there is not room enough hardly to stretch your legs without kicking someone in the head on this boat."

Pryce had looked at him, his brows drawn, unamused. "Aedhir," he said. "The men are talking. I have heard them."

"I am not laying with her, Pryce," Aedhir had replied gently, amused and touched by Pryce's concern.

Aedhir had known his share of lovers since Iona had left him, some in Tiralainn, others still in the Morthir. In the end, these relationships had faltered and failed for the same reasons as had his marriage: his absence. He had never been in port for longer than three months at any given time; long enough to make love, he supposed, but not enough to fall in love, at least for him. He had never really known the women he had been with. He had known casual, unimportant things about them, but it had been ages since he had last simply sat down and talked with a woman, exchanged points of view with her, debated, laughed with her. He had enjoyed this with Tacita. He had enjoyed her company, her conversation. If that was enough to get his men gossiping, their minds awl with preposterous, lecherous nonsense, then they were all bloody daft in Aedhir's opinion.

He could hear soft rustling sounds as Tacita squirmed restlessly beneath her blankets. He wondered if their conversations disturbed her, and he stood, drawing three overlapping blankets he had draped about his shoulders for warmth tighter across his chest. He walked quietly toward the lean-to. He heard the quiet voices behind him falter as everyone watched him go, but tried to feign obliviousness. Pryce was less subtle; his voice faded in mid-sentence, and Aedhir could nearly feel the palpable weight of the young man's disapproving gaze on the back of his shoulders.

Tacita heard the sounds of Aedhir's boot soles crunching in the snow, and she rolled over, looking behind her as he drew near. Aedhir squatted at the threshold of the makeshift shelter, balancing his weight against his toes and folding his legs beneath him. He could not see much more of her from this close proximity than he could at a distance, but he had seen her move, and knew she was roused.

"Did we wake you?" he asked quietly.

Tacita shook her head. "No," she said. Her voice sounded odd, hoarse and moist. She sniffled quietly. "No, I...I was not sleeping. It is alright."

She sat up to face him, drawing her long legs beneath her. As she did, she moved her hands, wiping her fingertips against her cheeks. He realized she had been weeping, and he blinked, startled.

“Tacita,” he said softly, reaching for her. He touched her, letting his palm cup her cheek. “What is it? What is wrong?”

She lowered her face. Her narrow shoulders trembled beneath her blankets and she brought her hand to her mouth, pressing her fingers against her lips. “It...it is nothing.”

“But you are weeping,” he said.

“It is nothing,” she told him again. She looked up at him, and managed a small, fleeting smile. “I am sorry, Aedhir.”

He brushed his thumb against her cheek, following the dark, cruel mark of the catasta tattoo. He had noticed many occasions when she seemed overcome with a terrible, poignant melancholia on the longboat. She would sometimes spend hours sitting beside him, gazing out across the water, her eyes distant and seized with a tremendous sorrow he did not understand. Whatever misery weighed on her heart pained him, but she obviously meant to keep it hers alone, secret and hidden. “There is nothing to be sorry for,” he said.

“Will you...please, will you stay with me awhile?” she asked, in a soft, tremulous voice.

He did not know the source of her pain, but he understood it nonetheless. Having lived seventeen years with the heartache of his own loss, he knew what it was like to feel alone. He nodded. “Of course, Tacita.”

She scooted her hips back against her pallet, making room for him beneath the canopy. She lay on her side again, rolling over and presenting her back to him, drawing her knees toward her stomach. Aedhir lay behind her, spooned against her, folding his arm beneath his head and resting his cheek against the crook of his elbow. He draped his other arm across the slim indentation of her waist and felt her hand find his, her fingers slipping between his own. Tacita settled herself comfortably, tucking the contours of her form against his, and he felt her hair brush against his face.

“Thank you, Aedhir,” she whispered. She trembled against him and began to weep again, softly, her tears breaking his heart.

“It is alright,” he said, because he did not know what else to offer her. He squeezed her hand, tightened his arm gently against her in an embrace. “It is alright.”

He knew the others could see them; their tongues were probably wagging loose of their moorings in fervent, hushed innuendo and rumor, but he did not care. Tacita was grieving for something; whether her own circumstances or others he did not know of, he did not know. She was hurting, something deep, visceral and unyielding, and his company, his touch brought comfort to her somehow. Again, he wondered if his resemblance to her friend, Marcus offered this to her.

Tacita was tall, but a very slight, slender woman. Her body felt delicate pressed against his, her hands small, her fingers spindly through his own. He imagined that was why she did not mind Wen’s company when they came aground; Wen’s physical build was slim as well, and likely unintimidating to Tacita. Tacita did not mind the other men aboard the longboat, and watched them, listened to them with curiosity and interest, but she kept a wary distance from them at all times. Most of them were strapping, burly fellows, like Odhran and Thierley, and this seemed to unnerve Tacita. She liked Pryce, who, like Aedhir and Wen, was lean and slender, although sometimes when she looked at Pryce, she would seem sad somehow, particularly if she saw him and Aedhir together, laughing or talking. Aedhir had explained to her the circumstances of his relationship with Pryce, and how he had come to be the young man’s guardian.

“You love him,” she had said softly, her eyes filling with sorrow and realization.

“Yes, I do,” he had replied. “With all of my heart...as if he was my own.”

“You are his father,” she had said.

He had nodded. “Yes. He gets his good looks from me, I like to think.”

He had been trying to coax a smile from her. Tacita had blinked at him and then laughed, the unhappiness draining from her face, her entire, lovely countenance seeming to brighten as her mouth unfurled in a broad smile.

She shuddered beside him, her breath fluttering in a soft, miserable gasp as she wept. Aedhir drew her all the more against him, close enough to feel the heat of her form seeping through their blankets, and she clutched at his hand. *Tell me why you are*

hurting, Tacita, he thought, anguished for her. Tell me what to do. Tell me how to make it better.

“It is alright,” he whispered to her. “You are safe now. You are safe with me.”

I promise, Tacita, he thought. Whatever has happened, whoever has hurt you, it is over. You are safe with me. I promise you.

She did not answer him, but she drew his hand away from her belly, bringing his fingertips toward her face. She held his hand here, clasped between her own, and she fell asleep this way, her cheek pressed against his hand as though she could hear his thoughts, and found comfort within his promise.

By daybreak, they had taken to the water again. It was a dismal day, no different than any other they had seen in the last week and a half, at least; grey skies filled with an impenetrable band of clouds, light snowfall peppering down upon them. The night had proven unrestful for most of the men, and they were all haggard with the morning light, weary and unnerved. Strange sounds had made their way down from the mountains of Sube throughout the night, a faint and eerie cacophony of distant cries and the resounding din of steel against steel. The noises had seemed surreal, waxing and waning with the ebb of the wind, wafting toward them from the cragged slopes and peaks, and the men had been frightened.

“Bloody ghosts,” Frey Goldron said quietly, as the longboat sailed an eastward course, following the arm of Qoyina Bay. Frey’s eyes were wide and round as he spoke, his gaze darting along the parallel shorelines nervously. “That is what it was, I tell you. Bloody damn ghosts. This land is haunted. Those Enghan have put a curse on it and we are not welcome here.”

Others around him murmured in concurrence. They ate breakfast anxiously, their eyes sharp along the coasts, the lighthearted mood of the previous evening dissolved in full.

“Not the Enghan,” said Phelim Robillard. “Remember that time we sailed to Priene in northern Torach two years ago, Duff? Near the Garyelloch Isles? Those imperial fleet sailors we met in port told us the whole of the Chagan Sea was

haunted—monsters in the water, spirits in the mountains. The Enghan did not curse the land—the Giants did. They cursed it when they all died out.”

Aedhir stood behind the helm, his arms folded across his chest, his brows drawn as he gazed across the water toward the Sube peninsula. The Abhacan had once lived in Lydia, on the other side of the channel, but the Fathacan—sometimes called Giants on account of the towering heights of their gangly, elongated forms—had lived in Sube thousands of years ago. From what he understood of them, the Fathacan had been a primitive, gentle, pastoral race, driven eastward from their native lands and into the unforgiving terrain of the Nordr mountains in the farthest, northernmost corner of what was now Mikill’fit in the Engjold territory. They had retreated to avoid the migration of menfolk from Torach and the southern Morthirian states—the people who had eventually become the Enghan. The Fathacan had been unable to withstand the brutal winters of the Nordr mountains, and they had died. A precious few had risked the perilous seaward passage across the frigid Ionium Sea, sailing to Tiralainn. They had set up a small colony here, deep within the Barren mountains of Tiralainn’s northern expanse, an isolated region that had kept them secret and secluded for more millennia. This last cluster of Fathacan had died out during the First War; it was Aedhir’s understanding from Rhyden that one of them—the last—had been among the witch-queen Ciardha’s minions. Rhyden had seen the Giant with his own eyes and another Elf, a warrior named Iasal Gabhlan had killed it in heated, bloody battle.

Aedhir doubted the Fathacan had cursed the land. He had never been one to believe in such things as ghosts and spirits, although Rhyden had told him he had seen Trejaeran Muirel in his stateroom on the night the *a’Maorga* had been ravaged by the gale. Trejaeran had tried to warn Rhyden about the main mast breaking, and Rhyden had shared this with Aedhir with such honest, earnest implore that Aedhir had been willing to concede the possibility.

However, in this circumstance, he did not think what they had heard were ghosts. Most of the men in his crew had never seen a battle before, a real, brutal, bloody siege, but Aedhir had in his youth, during his tenure in the First War. That is what the noises had reminded him of—war—and this realization alarmed and disturbed him more than the prospect of any phantoms. They sailed along territories that were in a state of

constant political upheaval, as the Enghan in the north and the Oirat to the south fiercely defended their freedom, and tried to keep desperate hold of lands the Torachans were equally determined to claim. He did not want to find himself caught in the middle of a bloody damn turf war.

Let us just find Rhyden and get the bloody duchan out of here, he thought, frowning. He hoped to accomplish this today. He did not know where along the shores of Qoyina Bay the Oirat intended to deliver Rhyden, but he had posted his three best lookouts—Tuathal, Semias and Euan—to keep every measure of coast watched at all times, the horizon constantly monitored for signs of distant boats, encampments, campfire smoke from the forests or foothills. The Oirat would be found somewhere, he was certain of it. Even if they abandoned their boat and set off for one of their camps on foot, his lookouts would spy the boat on a beach, or the cleft mark in the mud left as they dragged it from the water. There would be footprints in the snow, a clear and apparent trail for them to follow. The Oirat did not realize Aedhir followed them; they had taken no precautions to hide their stopping points so far, and they would not now, not on their own territory.

I will find you today, Rhyden, Aedhir thought. He had ordered all of the an'dagas distributed that morning. The rest of the crew had long since been commissioned their swords and daggers. The crates of rifles had been removed from the stern storage compartment; they were unlocked and at the ready to be taken by the officers in hand if needed. *I will find you—by my breath, they cannot keep me from it, and I will bring you home.*

“Captain Fainne—hoah!” Euan suddenly shouted out from the port side of the bow. He stood poised upon the lookout bench, his body leaning out over the foamy cleft of water carved by the prow, one hand holding his spy scope up to his face, the other thrust out across the water, pointing emphatically. At his cry, all hands turned toward him, their faces stricken with alarm. Aedhir hurried toward the foredeck, his stride brisk as he stepped over benches and storage crates.

“What do you see, Euan?” he called out.

Euan turned to him, pale and wide-eyed. “Three boats brought aground, sir, off the port,” he said, his voice quavering with anxiety.

“Thierley, brail up that sail,” Aedhir said, as Euan stepped down from the lookout point, passing the scope to Aedhir. “Deag, Phelim, Frey and Jobin—put the oars in the water, give us some drag. Deaden us if you can.”

“Aye, Captain,” Thierley said, moving swiftly toward the mast. “Mister Frankley, a hand if you will, lad.”

“Aye, sir,” Odhran said, hurrying to help Thierley.

“Aye, Captain,” said the crewmen ordered to the oars, as they scrambled to their positions along the bench rows.

Aedhir lifted the scope to his eye, staring out across the water toward the northern coastline. His breath drew still as he found the boats Euan had seen—three longboats, their sails furled, run aground along a muddy expanse of beach, their sterns floating in the waning tide.

Aedhir’s longboat was about thirty-five feet long. Each of these on the shoreline was at least fifteen feet longer. There was no sign of any movement on the beach, or the pine forests beyond, no activity or signs of encampment, and he frowned.

“Is it the Oirat?” Pryce asked, coming to stand near Aedhir. He leaned out over the water, able to see the boats from a distance without a scope.

“I do not know,” Aedhir said quietly.

“Are there any signs of them?” Pryce asked.

“None that I can see.”

“Three longboats,” Pryce said. “Why are there three of them? Did others come to meet them, do you think?” He frowned thoughtfully. “And what the bloody duchan are they doing ashore in Sube?”

These same thoughts had occurred to Aedhir. “I do not know, Pryce,” he said again, feeling the boat slow in its course as the sail was drawn up against the yard, and the oars met the water, dragging against the forward momentum the wind had offered them. He stepped down from the lookout perch, handing the scope back to Euan. “Keep your eyes on that beach,” he said. “Tell me if you see any movement, any people.”

“Aye, Captain,” Euan said.

“The rest of you, bear a’hand to your row stations,” Aedhir said, scanning the anxious crew with his gaze. “Take us around to port and bear in with the land. Mister

Poel—clear the anchor if you will. Lieutenant Finamur, lend him a hand. We will drop her offshore.”

“Aye, sir,” Wen said, snapping to attention and hurrying toward the stern.

“Aye, Captain,” Pryce said, turning on his boot heel and following Wen.

They rowed the longboat toward the shallow indentation of shoreline that served as a small, natural port. Aedhir ordered them to anchor when they reached about ten feet from the beach. He did not want to chance coming aground until he knew whether or not the Oirat were nearby. The beached longboats were enormous, each capable of holding at least thirty men apiece. If there were ninety Oirat with Rhyden now, Aedhir and his crew were grossly outnumbered. On the water, they had some hope of outrunning the larger craft, outmaneuvering them in the open strait, but if their ship was stuck aground, they could be overpowered easily, and massacred if the Oirat decided to fight.

Tacita stood amidship, near the mast, where she was least likely to be in anybody’s way. She looked over the portside of the boat as they drew near to the land, her expression troubled, her arms folded across her bosom.

“Is it the Oirat?” Aedhir asked her quietly, walking toward her.

She met his gaze. “I do not know,” she said. “The Enghan use longboats, too. But there are no Enghan villages in this area that I have ever heard of. It is too close to the empire’s coast, too dangerous for them. I do not know why they would be here.”

“If it is the Oirat, it would appear they have found some friends,” Aedhir said. “I want you to remain aboard the boat. I am keeping four men aboard, and Wen besides. You will be safe here.”

Tacita nodded. She draped her hand against his arm. “What of you?” she asked quietly.

“I am going ashore, into the woods to look around,” he said. She looked stricken at this, anxious and he smiled at her gently, brushing the cuff of his fingers against her cheek. “I will be alright. Do not worry.”

She nodded again, not seeming the least bit comforted.

Once they came within range of the shore, and prepared to drop anchor, Aedhir ordered Thierley, Odhran and Pryce to the bow of the ship, isneachan rifles in hand and

poised at the ready to cover their approach. The three officers covered all sides. Odhran was the best shot out of them, and he stood at the lookout point on the prow. Pryce genuflected along the starboard bulwark, his rifle cocked against his shoulder, while Thierley covered the port, keeping the muzzle of his isneach aimed deliberately at the three longboats.

The crew was as guarded and wary as a cluster of deer venturing out into a seemingly innocuous open meadow. They dropped anchor and relaxed the oars, shifting their grips to the hilts of their swords, their gazes nervous and uneasy.

“Deag, Phelim, Frey and Jobin,” Aedhir said, addressing the sailors. “You four are to keep aboard with Mister Poel and my lady Metella. Keep to your benches and at the ready with those oars. Mister Poel, you keep ready to weigh anchor on my command—cut and run if you have to. I do not know what to expect ashore, and a hasty exit may be in order.”

“Aye, Captain,” Wen said.

“Aye, Captain,” said Deag, Phelim, Frey and Jobin, their voices overlapping.

“Mister Feldwick, Mister Frankley, you both are with me,” Aedhir said, turning to glance over his shoulder toward the men perched at the stem. “We are searching the woods. You, too, Mister Fancott. We will need your sharp eyes.”

“Aye, sir,” said Euan.

“The rest of you are going ashore under Lieutenant Finamur,” said Aedhir. “Hold the beach and wait for us. Lieutenant, you give the order to cut and run if anything should happen.”

Aedhir, Thierley, Odhran and Euan waded ashore first, while Pryce and Wen remained poised at the stern of the longboat, covering them with their rifles. When they had reached the beach, Pryce and the others followed. The water was like ice, dousing them from the waist down, but the men shivered on the shoreline without complaint. They fanned out, swords drawn, searching the beached longboats, but discovered no occupants, no signs of any movement or activity on the shore.

“Wait for me. If something happens, I will call to you,” Aedhir told Pryce, quietly, clapping his hand against the young man’s shoulder. “Keep your eyes sharp.”

Pryce stared at him, his face filled with worry and fear. "You do the same," he said, trembling with cold. "Have a care."

Aedhir smiled at him, trying to convey confidence he did not feel. "I will be right back," he said. He turned to his three sentries and nodded his chin toward the woods. "Let us go."

They moved quietly through the trees, disappearing into the forest, their boots crunching softly in the snow and matted pine needles. They had observed evidence of massive foot traffic on the beach, in both the mud and trampled snow. The tracks had led into the forest, with no evidence of any return. Once among the trees, the footprints branched out in a broad swath, although they all seemed to remain heading in one common direction. Aedhir, Thierley, Odhran and Euan followed them for about ten minutes deep into the woods, and Aedhir glanced at Thierley.

"How many, would you say?" he whispered, his breath frosting in the air.

Thierley raised one bushy eyebrow. He had slung his isneach across his shoulders by a broad strap of leather, exchanging the rifle for the smaller an'daga pistol, as had Aedhir and Odhran. "Judging by the tracks and the size of those boats?" he said softly. He met Aedhir's gaze gravely. "I would say seventy-five, maybe a hundred. There are a lot of prints running 'round."

Aedhir nodded. He had drawn the same grim conclusion. *We may be in trouble here*, was Thierley's implied sentiment, offered with his eyes, not his words. Aedhir was inclined to agree with him.

"They are different," Thierley said, and he paused, looking down at the snow. "Did you notice?"

"What do you mean?" Aedhir asked.

"The boot soles are different," Thierley said, nodding toward the tracks. "The Oirat tracks we have seen all the while have been made by a hard, treaded sole, probably bone or hoof cut with trough marks for traction. You could see the ridges left in the snow in their prints. These here, these are something soft-soled, stitched up the middle. See the seam in this one here? I thought maybe the Oirat tracks just got tromped all over on the beach, but I do not know. I have not seen a one of theirs like I have grown accustomed to, and I have been looking fairly close for them."

Odhran and Euan were ahead of them, but paused now, realizing Aedhir and Thierley had stopped. They walked back to join them. “What is it, Captain?” Odhran asked quietly.

Aedhir looked at Thierley. “We should turn back,” Thierley said to him. “If you want my opinion, that is. These are not our folks. These are someone else; someone we have not met with yet—and by the numbers of them, I do not think we want to make their acquaintance.”

“We cannot take that chance, Thierley,” Aedhir said. “There are different tribes of Oirat. Maybe these prints belong to a different tribe, who wear different boots. Tacita said she did not know of any Enghan villages around this coastline. It is too close to the empire for them to be safe. Why would they be here? Who else would be here but the Oirat? And if the Oirat are here, then Rhyden is with them.”

Thierley nodded and shrugged, scratching the tip of his bulbous nose with the barrel end of his an’daga. “Alright, then,” he said.

“When do you think these tracks were made?” Aedhir asked him.

“It snowed some this morning, and overnight besides,” Thierley said. “Not much dusting over them, but they are sheltered beneath the trees somewhat. I would say last night, early this morrow.”

“Which would be about right for the Oirat to reach the beach and come ashore,” Aedhir said. “They have never been more than five hours ahead of us. They must have sent word somehow to one of their nearby tribes to meet them.”

“Captain, if I may, sir, I thought the Oirat meant to bring Rhyden into the mountains,” Odhran said, looking perplexed.

“There are mountains here, Mister Frankley, all around us,” Aedhir said, wagging his pistol skyward demonstratively.

“No, sir, begging your pardon,” Odhran said. “You told us you thought that the Oirat were bringing Rhyden into the *Khar Mountains*, to wherever they had discovered the original inscription the charcoal rubbing was taken from. The Khar Mountains are south, across the strait in Ulus. Why would they be here, traveling en masse into Sube?”

Aedhir looked at him, his brow arched. This had been bothering him, too. Had the boats and footprints all been on the other bloody damn side of the Qoyina, he would not have felt such uncertainty. But now, with what Thierley had pointed out about the boot prints, he had to admit perhaps he was mistaken.

“Odhran is right, Captain,” Thierley said. “Begging your pardon and what-not. I tell you, the timeframe might be right, but the rest of this does not make sense. These are not our folks.”

“Bloody rot,” Aedhir sighed, his brows furrowed. “If they are the Oirat, we are abandoning Rhyden if we turn around.”

“And if they are not, we are abandoning him anyway, because we may likely bloody be killed by whoever left these footprints,” Thierley said.

Aedhir looked at him for a long moment. “You are worse than my bloody damn wife was,” he said finally. “Nag, nag, nag.”

“That wounds me, Captain,” Thierley told him, scratching his nose again with his pistol. “We can come back. Let us search the rest of the bay. The wind has been in our favor. We can cover most of it by nightfall, and find our way back to this point if we find nothing else. If it is the Oirat, then like you said, they have a lead on us already. Give them a little bit more. It will be safer, if they have found these sorts of numbers for themselves.”

“You are right,” Aedhir conceded, sighing again. “You and Odhran are both right. It makes no damn sense. Let us go back. We can weigh anchor and be underway again before we—”

His words cut off as a sudden, piercing shriek echoed through the forest. All four of them whirled about, their eyes flown wide in startled alarm. As the cry faded, echoing among the snow-laden pine boughs, the air stirred with the fluttering of wings, doves and winter quail taking aloft in panic, frightened by the scream.

“Mother Creator in frilled knickers,” Thierley whispered, drawing back on the doghead of his pistol. “What in the bloody, blazing duchan was that?”

“It came from ahead of us,” Euan hissed, wide-eyed and ashen. “Those foothills beyond the trees. Do you see—?”

The scream came again, and they all shrank in bright, new terror.

“No, no—do not—no—!” the voice shrieked out in the common tongue, a man’s voice, shrill and agonized.

Aedhir’s heart pounded beneath his chest, and his breath tangled in his throat. He could not be sure; the voice was ripped with pain and fear, and Aedhir’s frightened mind processed the sound, the words with its own prejudices and presumptions.

“Rhyden...!” he whispered, anguished. He sprang forward, sprinting through the trees.

“Aedhir—hoah!” Thierley called out.

“That was Rhyden!” Aedhir cried, looking over his shoulder and nearly plowing headlong into a pine tree in the process. He stumbled, slapping his hands against the broad trunk to prevent a fall, regained his footing and ran once more. “I think that was Rhyden!”

The others followed him, and they scrambled up a cragged ridge of broken, eroded granite. The slope was rough hewn and slippery with ice and snow, but they managed to grope and scabble their way to the top. They dropped to their bellies and lay in a line, framed by the shelter of the forest, and spindly, brave pines and firs that grew along the rocky outcropping. The rocks marked the boundary of a fairly steep ravine, a place where the forests yielded to mountains, and a narrow but deep valley carved between the foothills and distant peaks. They could look down over the edge of granite and snow and see the valley beyond—and what they saw there stunned them anew.

“Mother Above and all her denizens of mercy,” Thierley breathed in shock.

“What in the duchan...?” Aedhir whispered.

A tremendous battle had taken place overnight and in the wee hours of the morning in the valley below them. Here was the source of the haunting, distant shrieks and wails that they had heard during the night; not the sounds of ghosts at all, but those of death yet the same.

Some sort of large encampment had been set up in the valley; hundreds of tents lay crumpled or burning across the ravine. The snow-covered ground was trampled and stained dark with blood. Men lay dead among the debris of the ruined camp; too many to count, bodies numbering surely close to three or four hundred. It took Aedhir a long,

stunned moment before his mind could grasp what his eyes were witnessing—the slain men were not primitive warriors like the Oirat, but armored soldiers dressed in scarlet uniforms with silver plate armor covering their torsos and limbs. He blinked in startled realization.

“It is a Torachan camp,” he whispered, and Thierley turned to him, his brows raised. “Those are Torachan legionnaires—look at their uniforms. They are imperial soldiers.”

“Sure enough,” Thierley said after another long moment’s observation. “Hoah, and they got their asses trounced, by the looks of things.”

There were men moving through the remnants of the Torachan encampment, probably two hundred, if not more, either on foot or by some sort of steed Aedhir had never seen before, what looked to be some manner of giant, burly weasel. The animals were the size of horses, nimble and fleet-footed, darting among the collapsed and burning tents, bearing their riders about with graceful, astonishing ease.

“What in the duchan...?” Aedhir whispered.

The men who remained at the camp were as unfamiliar to Aedhir as their beasts. Though they were fair-skinned, like Torachans, they were obviously not imperial soldiers. They were tall and lean, with long hair and beards, all adorned with numerous plaits or gathered tails. They dressed in earth-toned garb with overlapping, interlocking plates of thick leather over their chests and shoulders, as if meant to serve as armor. Their clothes were dirty and blood-smeared from battle, and they all wore leather caps on their pates, with thin fur trimming to keep their ears covered. Their tunics fell to their knees in hem, lined with fur, like their hats. Their leggings were tucked into their hide boots, wrapped with straps from their knees to their ankles to hold them in place. Most of them carried broad, round shields strapped to their backs, made of wood, painted with bright red dye, and dome-shaped iron caps on the front. Some bore composite bows and enormous, stocked quivers slung across their backs instead of shields; all of the men carried swords and daggers against their hips, and most had short-handled axes with broad, imposing blades fettered to their belts.

These strange men moved about the Torachan camp in organized, busy groups, calling out to one another in a foreign tongue. They sifted among the bodies and debris,

hauling out fallen fellows. They lay the dead in the backs of large wooden carts led by hitched teams of broad, brawny horses. Others helped the injured among them, carrying them or leading them, limping and staggering toward other nearby carts. Many seemed to be sorting through the ruins of the Torachan tents and corpses, collecting weapons and scavenging supplies.

One group had discovered a Torachan soldier alive beneath one of the fallen tents. He was the screamer Aedhir and the others had heard. As he tried to crawl out from beneath the tent, squirming against the snow on his belly, his hands splayed and clawing for desperate purchase, Aedhir realized his legs had been broken; they dragged behind him in a tangled, crooked heap, and every time he moved, or the unfamiliar, bearded men approached him, he would shriek anew.

“No—no—!” he wailed, and as he lifted his torso from the ground, Aedhir saw a broad blood stain beneath him; he had apparently been nearly eviscerated as well. One of the bearded men strode toward him, genuflected beside the soldier. He turned to his fellows, said something quietly in his unfamiliar language and they all bowed their heads.

The Torachan shrieked and shrieked, even though the man made no effort at first to touch him. Instead, like the others behind him, he lowered his head to the ground as though offering some sort of quiet, reverent prayer. He then reached out, taking the soldier’s head between his hands. The man had one last chance to squeal out in shrill terror, and then the bearded man jerked his arms mightily, snapping his neck.

“Who are they?” Euan whispered, horrified by what they had just witnessed.

“They are Enghan,” Odhran breathed, his eyes widening as he stared down at the valley. “Mother Above—they are Enghan.”

“Back,” Aedhir hissed, loosening his hands from the rock beneath him, letting his body begin to slide slowly, inching toward the ground. “Go back now.”

The four of them slid and climbed carefully, quietly down from the ledge. When they reached the ground, they stood in a stricken huddle, blinking at one another, shivering.

“We go back to the beach,” Aedhir said softly. “As fast as we can—as quietly as we can. They did not see us. They do not know we are here—let us keep it that way. We get back on the boat and we get out of here.”

“Alright, then,” Thierley whispered, nodding once.

They moved swiftly through the trees, making their way back to the shores of Qoyina. Thierley took the lead, with Odhran and Aedhir behind him, flanking his stride, Euan bringing up the rear. All at once, Aedhir heard Euan utter a sharp, startled cry and he whirled about, his boot soles skittering, slipping in the snow.

“Euan—” he began, and he froze, his eyes widening, his breath caught.

An Enghan man had appeared out of nowhere behind them, emerging from among the shadows of the pine trees. He had caught Euan as the young man sprinted past, and held him pinned firmly against his chest. The Enghan’s hand had closed against Euan’s jaw, forcing his head slightly backwards. He held the broad blade of a large dagger pressed against the shelf of Euan’s chin, and Euan stared at Aedhir, his eyes enormous with helpless fright, his legs still poised in mid-stride.

“Captain Fainne...!” Euan whimpered.

Aedhir, Odhran and Thierley all raised their pistols in simultaneous, swift movements. The Enghan man swept his gaze across them, his brows drawn.

“Thu hroer eigi,” he said to them.

“Odhran...flank him...” Aedhir breathed.

Odhran moved slowly, stepping to his left, holding the an’daga between his palms, his aim fixed on the Enghan’s head. He cocked the hammer against his thumb and kept his finger poised lightly against the brass trigger. “I have him, sir,” he whispered.

“I got him, too, Captain,” Thierley said, moving to the right, drawing the doghead back on his own pistol.

The Enghan frowned at them and shoved the blade roughly against Euan’s neck, wrenching another frightened cry from him. “Thu hroer eigi!” the Enghan shouted. “Ek vig hann! Ther gith mik! Ther gorith that!”

“What the duchan is he saying?” Thierley growled, frowning.

“I think he knows he is outnumbered,” Aedhir said. He met the Enghan’s angry gaze. “Let him go,” he said loudly. “Right now. We do not want to hurt you. Release our friend.”

There was a soft whisper, a rustling of snow and pine needles, and then more Enghan stepped out from among the trees. They moved as swiftly and silently as shadows, appearing out of the forest with axes and swords in their hands, more than fifty at least by Aedhir’s startled, perfunctory count, surrounding them in every direction.

“Captain Fainne...!” Odhran gasped, jerking his head about, his eyes wide with fright.

“Bugger me—!” Aedhir said, and he felt heavy hands fall against his shoulders, jerking him roughly backward. He struggled against whoever had laid hold of him, trying to twist himself around and wedge the an’daga barrel between him and his captor. He fell obligingly still as a dagger shoved beneath his chin. It had been a good twenty years since Aedhir had felt a blade drawn with any sort of menacing intent against his skin. He froze, his body motionless, his eyes wide.

“Thu hroer eigi,” said the man who held him. Aedhir was jerked backward again and he felt an arm clamp over his shoulder, falling firmly against his chest. He heard Odhran yelp and caught sight of the boy out of the corner of his eye as another tall, strapping Enghan grabbed him in similar fashion.

“Get your damn rot hands off of me!” Thierley snapped, wriggling and thrashing as two Enghan seized him roughly. “Bloody rot damn savages—hoah, now! Watch your hands, you bloody bastard!”

“Hverr thu ert?” one of the Enghan asked, a young man with a thick blond beard drawn into four plaits that dangled from his chin. He stepped out from the ranks of Enghan men and strode purposefully toward Aedhir, his hands closed into fists, his brows drawn as the others wrested the pistols and rifles from Aedhir, Odhran and Thierley, the sword from Euan. When Aedhir furrowed his brows defiantly and offered no reply except to stare at the Enghan, the young man frowned. “Thu maelir!” he snapped, leaning toward Aedhir. “Hverr thu ert? Hvadan thu ert?”

The man holding Aedhir forced the blade of his knife firmly into Aedhir’s throat. He could feel the metal edge cutting into his skin, and he gritted his teeth, glaring at the

Enghan. “I do not understand you,” he said. “My name is Aedhir Fainne. I am a captain in the Crown Navy of Tiralainn. My men and I mean no harm or trespass to you. Let us go.”

“Galti, thu finnar Kolbrun,” the Enghan man said, turning his head to speak to another over his shoulder. “Hann er spakr ok segir tungainn Torachan.”

Aedhir did not know what he said, but he knew the word *Torachan*. He watched as the man the Enghan had addressed turned and darted back among the trees, moving swiftly, ducking his head beneath the boughs as he passed.

They think we are Torachans, Aedhir thought. Mother Above, they will kill us all—they think we are Torachans!

“We are not Torachans,” he said, drawing the young man’s stern gaze again. “Please, we are not Torachans. Odhran, what bloody language are they speaking? Tell them we are not Torachans.”

“I...I do not know, Captain,” Odhran said. “They speak their own language. It is lost among the Abhacan. We are likely the first people from Tiralainn to ever meet an Enghan—to hear them speak.”

“Hoah, do we not feel special,” Thierley muttered.

“It sounds like a derivative of the common tongue,” Odhran said. “The people who are now the Enghan...they came from Torach and Apameia originally. Their language is probably based on the same dialects that formed the common tongue, only theirs did not evolve the same way.”

“H’ljoth!” snapped one of the Enghan standing behind Odhran’s captor. He reached out, closing his hand in Odhran’s hair, forcing his head back. Odhran cried out in pain.

“Take your rot damn hand off of him!” Aedhir shouted, struggling against the knife shoved against his throat.

“Hyneff, haetta thu—angrith hann eigi,” cried the young Enghan before Aedhir, turning toward Odhran. His tone of voice was sharp and admonishing, his expression fierce. “Thu munt hlytha ok nu.”

At his words, the other Enghan loosened his hand from Odhran’s hair and stepped away. Clearly, the young man was a leader among them; the others deferred to

him, obeyed him. When he turned to Aedhir again, Aedhir met his gaze, imploring. “We are not Torachans,” he said again. “Please—listen to me. We are not Torachans.”

“Ther takith tha,” the Enghan leader said, ignoring Aedhir altogether. He turned to the others, gesturing broadly with his hands. “Takith tha nu,” he called out.

The Enghan began to move through the trees. Aedhir was jerked roughly, dragged in tow by the tall, burly man who held him fast.

“Captain Fainne!” Aedhir heard Odhran say as he was forced to follow the group.

“Do not fight them, Odhran,” Aedhir said. “It is alright, lad. Thierley, do not fight them.”

“Would be a bloody damn moot point if I did, sir,” Thierley growled, as he was shoved roughly forward.

The dagger against Aedhir’s throat did not move as he stumbled along, and as the young leader of the Enghan group stepped away from his view, Aedhir grimaced, struggling to turn his head and see him. “Where are you taking us?” he yelled, squirming, shrugging his shoulders as his captor forced him in step. “Where are you bloody—?”

As the Enghan moved his arm from Aedhir’s chest and clapped his large, gloved hand against firmly Aedhir’s mouth to muffle him, he realized

Mother Above...!

and his heart seized with fresh terror.

Wait for me. If something happens, I will call to you, he had told Pryce, standing on the shore of Qoyina Bay, placing his hand against the young man’s shoulder. *Keep your eyes sharp.*

The beach, Aedhir thought, stricken. *No, no—Mother Above, no!*

He shook his head furiously, vainly, struggling to shout out around the hand covering his mouth. *Pryce—please, get to the boat—get out of there! They are taking us to the beach. Mother Above—get out of there! They are taking us to the beach!*

Chapter Eleven

As Odhran, Aedhir, Thierley and Euan had waded the brief distance between the longboat and land, Pryce and Wen had stood together at the bow, their rifles against their shoulders, their aims trained upon the beach.

"I do not like this," Pryce said quietly, not averting his gaze from the shore.

The previous night, before the haunting cries and distant screams had ripped everyone from slumber, Wen had laid awake beneath her blankets and watched Pryce. He had slept facing her, with his hand against the ground between them, and after an hour, when Wen was certain no one would see, she had reached out tentatively, slipping her fingers against his palm.

"Pryce, I am Aelwen," she had whispered, and how easy it had been to say it, how readily the words slipped from her lips when he was not awake to hear or judge her by them. When she had first stepped foot aboard the *a'Maorga*, she had anticipated that the hardest thing she would have to do during that voyage would be to tell Aedhir the truth about who she was.

Her eyes had filled with tears; she felt them roll from the corners of her eyes, sliding down her cheek, trailing against the bridge of her nose. *I love you*, she had thought.

"I do not like it, either," she said to Pryce aboard the longboat. When Aedhir and his party reached the beach, Pryce was to follow him with other crewmen, leaving Wen and the four Aedhir had designated alone aboard the boat with Tacita.

Pryce glanced at Wen. "Keep an eye on her," he said in a hush.

"I will," Wen said, nodding.

I do not trust Tacita, he had confided in Wen only the night before. *It is like she is not telling us something*. He also did not trust their current, seemingly fortuitous circumstances, and clearly thought they might be connected somehow to Tacita.

Wen watched Pryce and the other six crewmen waded through the water, joining Aedhir on the beach. They searched the longboats, apparently finding no one hiding aboard. She saw Aedhir and Pryce speak with one another in close counsel. Aedhir

clapped his hand against Pryce's shoulder, and then turned and walked away. He, Odhran, Thierley and Euan disappeared into the woods, their gazes fixed on the ground as they followed the multitude of tracks they had discovered in the snow, and when they were gone, a long, unnerving wait began for the rest of them.

"I do not like this, not at all," muttered Phelim. He sat afore the mast on the port side of the boat, his hands draped across his oar shaft. He watched his friends on the beach with anxious eyes as they walked slowly across the mud, studying the footprints, pointing into the woods, or taking turns climbing aboard the unfamiliar longboats and investigating the supplies and contents left behind.

"Me either, Phelim," Deaglan said, frowning. He crossed his arms over his oar, his weight raising the heavy length of wood from the water. He sat behind Phelim, abaft the mast near the helm, and he looked at Tacita. The woman stood portside amidship, her gaze on the coast, her arms folded across her chest. Her brows were drawn, her lips pressed together, her long, unfettered blond hair fluttering in the breeze. "You do not think they are the Oirat, my lady?" Deag asked, drawing Tacita's gaze.

"I...I do not know," Tacita said quietly. "There does not seem to be an answer that makes any better sense."

"Sense?" Jobin asked. "There is no sense at all in this. You heard the Lieutenant, Deag. Why would the Oirat be in Sube?"

Wen was inclined to agree. If the boats had been on the opposite shore, in Ulus, it would have been perfect logic. They believed the Oirat were bringing Rhyden to Ulus, where they likely intended to meet with more of their fellows. If they meant to bring him to the Khar, why would they have brought their boat ashore on the wrong side of the bay?

"Something is not right here," Frey said quietly. "We should not be here. We should just go."

Wen could see Pryce on the beach. He would turn to her sometimes, looking over his shoulder to the boat, but most of the time, he kept his gaze turned anxiously toward the trees. He paced along the beach, his isneach slung across his shoulders, his pistol in his hand.

Wen stood at the stern of the boat, near the anchor, as she had been told. She looked at Tacita. *You do not think it is the Oirat here at all, do you?* Wen thought, frowning. *Do you know who those boats belong to, Tacita? Are you just keeping it to yourself, tricking my father?*

The more she had thought about it of late, the more it seemed peculiar happenstance that Aedhir had come upon Tacita in the catasta as he had. That in a crowd of hundreds of people, he had stumbled upon the one woman who had admitted to seeing Rhyden there, that she had seen who bought him, and that she was familiar enough with the Oirat culture and homeland to lead them there, seemed too fortunate for simple coincidence. Again and again, Wen had thought about that day in the woods, when they had found the ikhama. She had the distinctive impression that Tacita might know why the Oirat had taken Rhyden, or at least had some semblance of an idea. Tacita had offered no reasons or suggestions, letting Aedhir draw his conclusions as he would, based on the evidence he was able to observe and ponder, and Wen wondered why she would do this if she had even the slightest inkling as to the Oirat's intentions.

I do not trust her, Pryce had told Wen. There is something about her. It is like she is not telling us something.

A sudden shriek echoed out of the foothills and mountain slopes. Wen jerked her head toward the sound, her eyes widening as she gasped in startled fright.

"Mother Above—!" Deag cried breathlessly, standing up from his bench.

On the beach, Pryce whirled toward the cry, drawing his pistol up reflexively, pointing the barrel toward the trees. The other sailors all stumbled at the sound, their swords poised, their bodies frozen with sudden, bright terror as they looked all about them.

"What in the duchan—?" Wen heard Tuathal say from shore.

"Was that the Captain?" Frey asked in the longboat, his eyes enormous with fright. "Hoah, sweet Mother Above, was that Captain Fainne?"

Tacita had leaned out across the water, pressing her hands against the portside bulwark, her expression stricken.

The scream came again, distant and poignant. "No, no—do not—no!"

Frey moaned, clapping his hands over his ears and hunching his shoulders. Deag leaned out over the water. Phelim stood, as well, and Jobin abandoned his row position, coming to stand with them along the portside of the boat.

“Son of a bitch, if they have bloody hurt Captain Faine...” Deag breathed, closing his hand against the hilt of his sword.

“You think Captain Fainne would scream?” Jobin asked, frowning as he looked toward the land. “Do not be a yob—it is the Captain. They could cut his bloody pair off with a dull, rusted blade and he would not give them a peep for their satisfaction.”

Wen could hear Pryce calling out orders on the beach, his voice sharp and shrill with alarm. “Put those boats in the water!” he snapped at the sailors. “Put your backs into it—get them adrift!”

“What is he doing?” Phelim asked, as they watched their friends rush about the beached longboats, shoving against them, trying to force them out into the water.

“He is getting rid of their bloody damn boats, what do you think?” Deag asked. “You want whatever bastard rots who could make Captain Fainne shriek following us out onto the bay?”

“That was not Captain Fainne,” Wen said quietly, her brows furrowed as she tried to convince herself as much as the sailors. “I know it was not. It did not sound like any of them.”

“This is madness,” Frey said from behind them, his voice warbling. “Oh, we should not be here. Call them back, Mister Poel. Tell the Lieutenant to call them back and let us just go.”

“Shut up, Frey, you ninny bastard,” Jobin growled, glowering over his shoulder. “Hold your oar, soak your breeches and shut the bloody duchar up.”

“Bugger off, Jobin—that was someone screaming,” Frey said. “That was not some friendly little ‘hullo and how-do-you-do.’ That was someone screaming—and there is someone or something out there that made them scream like that. I have not ever heard the likes...!”

“You will in about two breaths, you little rot ninny,” Jobin muttered, closing his hands into fists.

“Stop it, Jobin, leave him alone,” Wen said, and Jobin blinked at her. For a moment, she thought he would argue with her; he was her age, but much larger, stockier, and his brows crimped as he met her gaze. He opened his mouth, but then seemed to recall that she was an officer, and closed it once more.

“Yes, sir, Mister Poel,” he said quietly, turning his surly gaze back to the beach.

While the crewmen tried to shove the longboats into the water, Pryce hurried toward the treeline. He dashed back and forth here, his boots skittering in the snow and mud as he strained to see through the trees.

“He should take a group and go after them, by my breath,” Deag said.

Wen could tell Pryce was desperately considering this. Aedhir would be angry if he turned up alright and learned of it, and she knew Pryce realized this, as well. Pryce paced frantically about and turned to the longboat, looking at her, wide-eyed and imploring, as if seeking her counsel.

Long moments passed with nothing but silence from the mountains and woods. The screams did not come again. Ashore, the crewmen struggled to launch the longboats without much success; these were significantly larger and heavier than their own modest boat. Each had likely carried a crew twice again the number Aedhir had brought with them, and while they might have been able to maneuver the large, cumbersome crafts out from the tideline, the six crewmen with Pryce could not manage.

At last, Pryce called to them to stop. He tromped down to the water’s edge, his brows furrowed deeply, the silence disturbing him even more so than the screams that had preceded it. “Duff, Sengel, Semias, come with me,” he said. “The rest of you, get back on the boat. Leave that, Tuathal, come on, bear a’hand. Get back on the boat.”

He looked toward Wen. “Something is wrong,” he called out. “I am going after them.”

Pryce, no! she thought. *No, no, you cannot!*

“Weigh the anchor, Wen,” Pryce said, as the three crewmen he had ordered back to the longboat began wading out into the frigid surf, approaching them. “Man the oars and hold her along shore where she lies. Wait for us—but get out of here if you have to.”

He was frightened. It was difficult to tell in his face; the angles of his cheeks and jaw, the set of his brow and the thin line of his mouth lent his face a natural, austere appearance, but Wen knew him well now, well enough to see the fear beneath his grave exterior.

“Aye, Lieutenant,” she said, frightened for him. She wrapped her hands about the anchor line and turned to Deag. It was a small anchor, but there was no capstan to crank it home; she was not strong enough to heave it herself. “Deag, help me,” she said. “The rest of you, help the others aboard.”

One by one, the three crewmen from ashore clambered back onto the longboat. They stood together, soaked and trembling, watching Pryce and their fellows stride briskly toward the forest, disappearing into trees.

“You heard the Lieutenant,” Wen said as she and Deag hauled together, wresting the anchor out of the water. Her tone was sharper than she intended, brisk with fright. “Get to your oar posts, all of you. Bear a’hand and hold us here.”

“Aye, sir,” the sailors said.

She stepped back as Deag lowered the dripping anchor against the deck, bearing its weight between his broad fists. He squatted as he set it aside, and looked up at her. “Man the helm, Deag,” she said. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all, sir.”

A shot rang out like sharp, resounding thunder from the beach, and everyone whirled toward the sound.

“No—no—!” Wen heard Pryce cry out, and her heart seized with sudden terror.

“Pryce!” she gasped, rushing toward the portside bulwark.

“Mother Above!” Deag cried.

A swarm of men rushed out of the trees, storming down the beach. There must have been at least fifty of them, Wen realized in absolute horror, fifty large, burly men with beards and unfamiliar, fur-trimmed clothing, all of them bearing swords and battle axes in their hands. She shrank back from the bulwark, stumbling in shock and terror, her hands fluttering toward her mouth.

“Mother Above!” Deag shrieked. He turned to the crew. “Drop the oars! Drop the bloody damn oars! Get us out of here!”

Wen felt the longboat lurch as the men thrust the oars violently, desperately into the water. She heard Pryce before she caught sight of him; she heard him screaming her name.

“Wen! Wen—go! Go—get out of here! Wen!” he shrieked, and she saw him. One of the men had seized him from behind; he was large enough to clap his arm fully about Pryce’s waist and hoist him off of his feet. Pryce struggled, thrashing against the man, screaming to her, even as the man closed one large hand over Pryce’s mouth, forcing his head back, muffling him.

“Pryce!” She saw the others, the three crewmen Pryce had taken with him into the woods, also caught fast by the strangers; she saw Thierley among them, and then she moaned in new horror as she spied Odhran, struggling with his captors, and Aedhir.

“Father!” she wailed without thinking. The longboat was moving. They were steering it out of the shallows and into deeper water, into the strong eastward current of the bay. “No! No, no—stop! We cannot leave them behind!”

Twelve men sprinted to the edge of the water, all of them bearing enormous, recurved composite bows. They drew arrows from over their shoulders, reaching swiftly for broad, stuffed quivers against their backs, and they nocked arrows against their bowstrings, drawing their arms out parallel to the ground, finding their marks upon the longboat.

“Nei!” Tacita screamed. She caught the bulwark edge against her hands and leaped before anyone could realize what she was doing, much less stop her. She landed in the water. The longboat had pulled away from the shallows, and she floundered, thrashing about, swimming for the shore. “Nei!” she cried again, sputtering and choking as she whooped in a mouthful of saltwater. “Ther angrith tha! Ek beith! Ek beith!”

“Tacita, no—!” Wen shouted, and then she realized. Tacita had cried out to the men in a language Wen had never heard before. *She knows who they are*, she thought, stunned and stricken. *That bloody damn bitch! She knows who they are—she set us up! She led us into a trap!*

The row of archers fired at the longboat. The crewmen cried out in fright and cowered. Wen fell to the deck, throwing her hands over her head, listening to the arrows hissing over them, spearing forcefully into the hull, skewering into the mast.

“Mother Above!” Jobin cried out. “Row, you bloody bastards, row!”

Wen grasped the top of the bulwark in her hands and scrambled, getting her knees beneath her. She could see the archers readying another volley, and Tacita stumbling through the water toward them, holding up her hands.

“Nei—ther angrith oss!” she cried. “Ver erum fjandia eigi!”

“Rot damn bitch,” Wen hissed, and she reacted without thinking, hurling herself over the side of the longboat. She hit the water face-first and sank, thrashing her arms and legs. The icy water pierced her like sudden dagger-points, stripping the breath and wits from her. Her great coat was fashioned of thick wool; it was heavy to begin with, and when soaked through, it might as well have been made of lead. She struggled to swim, her hands flailing wildly as she forced her head from the water. She sucked in a gasping breath of air and swam for the shore, her hands clawing at the surface of the water, her legs kicking mightily to fight the tow of the current.

She heard the hiss of more arrows flying, the drumlike measures as they slammed into the boat. She heard someone aboard shriek in sudden pain, and she swam all the harder, her body numb with cold, her legs flopping beneath her, the weight of her coat, her boots dragging her down.

Her feet slapped against the silty bottom first, and then her knees, and Wen shoved her hands beneath her, trying to sit up in the water. Some of the bearded men—she did not know if they were Oirat or not—had waded out into the water. They had already seized Tacita roughly, dragging her out of the shallows, and now, Wen felt heavy hands clamp against the scruff of her lapels, hauling her to her feet, staggering and squirming, whooping for breath.

“Get...your rot hands off me...!” she gasped, shuddering with cold, soaked and nearly frozen. She wriggled as they dragged her to the beach. Strong, thick arms wrapped about her, and she kicked her feet, closing her hands into fists and beating against her captor. “Let go of me! Let go!”

She was wet, and managed to wriggle loose of him for one fleeting moment—not that she had anywhere to go even if she had escaped. The longboat was leaving; they were hauling ass for the Ulu coastline, and even though the archers continued firing on them, they did not slow in their rowing efforts, or turn around to come to their fellows' aid. As Wen slipped free for that fleeting moment, falling to her knees in the water, she felt the man's hands grope for purchase against her torso, his arms still wrapped about her. His palms fell inadvertently against her breasts, and she drove her elbow mightily, but futilely backwards, fighting with him.

"Let go of me!" she shrieked as he hauled her onto dry land. She flailed helplessly against him. "Let us go! You bastards! You bloody bastards—!" Her voice was reduced to stifled garble as the man clamped his hand firmly across her mouth.

She looked desperately at Pryce. He still struggled against the enormous man holding him, drumming his boots in the open air, shaking his head. His muffled voice mewled out from beneath the man's gloved palm as he met her gaze, his eyes wide and frightened.

They had dragged the crew all together, except for her and Tacita, and she saw Odhran staring at her, squirming against his captor. He was trying to cry out to her, shrugging his shoulders mightily, his brows furrowed as he uttered loud, garbled words around the hand over his mouth.

"Hvat er that?" another of the bearded men asked, walking toward her, addressing her captor. He was young, no older than Wen, with long blond hair fettered in numerous plaits beneath his leather helm. His beard had been fathered into a series of four braids beneath his chin. He had high cheeks, a long, prominent nose and small, widely set blue eyes. His brows furrowed as his gaze settled upon Wen.

"Hann er hon, Thorir," the man holding Wen replied, offering what sounded like a soft snort of laughter. His fellow paused in mid-stride, arching his brow.

"Hvat?" he asked.

Wen saw Aedhir as they dragged him forward. His brows were furrowed, and he fought with them as they forced him in step. His captor held a dagger shoved beneath his chin, and Wen whimpered in fright. Aedhir met her gaze and fell still, holding her eyes with his own.

“Hann er hon,” said the man holding Wen again, and she stopped struggling, falling silent.

Oh, Mother Above, she thought, in sudden dismayed realization. She did not need to speak their language to know what they were talking about. The man had felt her breasts; he had been rough with her up until that moment, and after that, he had been firm with her, restraining her, but his efforts had been far more gentle. *He felt my breasts...he knows...!*

Her bosom was not much, small enough to be camouflaged beneath the thick layers of her Naval uniform. No one had ever noticed. No one had certainly ever touched her torso to realize beneath her great-, justi-, waistcoats and shirt, she was a woman, not a man.

Until now, she thought, and she moaned, staring wide-eyed in horror at Aedhir. *Oh, bugger me, they know I am a bloody damn girl! They will tell them...oh, no, they will tell Father...!*

“Hon hafa brjosta,” said her captor, and the blond man before her arched his brow all the more.

“Ek se,” he said. He thrust his hand out suddenly, catching Wen squarely between the legs, his fingers delving briefly between her thighs. It was not a lewd gesture, merely one of curiosity. He was confirming what they suspected, but Wen still cried out, struggling, flailing and kicking at him.

“No!” Aedhir shouted, and he jerked away from his captor, shoving his elbow into the man’s midriff. The dagger lowered from his face as the man staggered back, and Aedhir rushed toward Wen, his hands closed into fists, his eyes ablaze with murderous intent. “Bastards!” he roared. “You bloody rot bastards—take on me, you coward rots! I am here—I am right bloody here!”

At the same time, Odhran bellowed like some sort of rabid, frenzied bear. He slammed his elbow back into his captor’s sternum, *whoofing* the breath from his lungs. He seized the man’s wrist between his fists, clamping hard enough to force him to loosen his grip on his dagger. “Bastards!” he yelled, and he buckled at the waist, heaving the man over his shoulder, sending him crashing into the mud. “Get your rot damn hands off of her, you bastards!”

The men converged on Aedhir and Odhran, struggling to restrain them. Odhran tore into them like a starved wolf in a hen house; his broad fists swung from the strong fulcrums of his shoulders as he plowed a path toward Wen, driving his knuckles into noses, teeth, cheeks, sending men sprawling and crumpling to the ground.

“I will kill you, you rot!” he shrieked at the man who had stuck his hands between Wen’s legs. He lunged toward the man, thrusting his finger out in threat; three men struggled with him, trying to block his passage. “I will bloody rip your damn head from your rotted shoulders, you bastard! Touch her again, and I will see you bleed, you bastard! Touch her again and you will die!”

It took four men to subdue Odhran, and he fought them wildly, spittle flying from his lips as he cursed at them. It took only one to control Aedhir; at Odhran’s words, he had fallen still, blinking at Wen in sudden, breathless shock. He staggered as one of the bearded men grabbed him roughly, hauling him back, and Wen blinked at him, feeling shamed, horrified color burning in her cheeks, tears stinging in her eyes.

“Her...?” Aedhir whispered, staring at Wen.

Oh, Mother Above, no...! her mind whimpered, and she felt her tears spill. She turned to Pryce, and realized the strangers’ curiosity, and Odhran’s words had not been lost upon him, either. He blinked at Wen, his mouth still muffled, his eyes enormous, bewildered and stunned.

A man shoved his way through the ranks toward them. He was slightly smaller than his fellows, with long dark hair caught worn bound beneath his leather cap in hundreds of slender, intricate braids. His beard and mustache were braided likewise. His slighter size did not seem to deter him in the least, as he knocked others aside with his elbows, his brows drawn. “Ther hroerith,” he snapped as he moved along. “Hroerith, ek segi—hroerith!”

He stopped in front of Wen, and she was startled when he smiled at her and Tacita. “Heilar,” he said, as if offering greeting, and then he said something sharply to the men holding them. Whoever he was, the man commanded some clout among his people, because Tacita and Wen were immediately released. Wen staggered in place clumsily, sodden and shivering, and she blinked at the man in confusion.

"I am Kolbrun Spaki," he said, addressing her in the common tongue. He spoke very carefully, but clearly and articulately. "I am sorry if they hurt you. They meant no discourtesy. They saw your clothes and thought you were a man."

Wen stared, stricken at Aedhir. She uttered a low, anguished moan, her hands darting to her mouth as new tears flooded her eyes.

"Wen...?" Aedhir asked her, confused.

"I...I am sorry," she whispered. She looked at Pryce, and found him still staring at her in utter disbelief. He uttered a soft, hurt, confused sound that nearly broke her heart. She tore her gaze away from him, unable to bear the bewildered pain in his eyes. She turned to Aedhir, stumbling toward him, reaching out with trembling hands. "I...I am sorry, Father...!" she cried, and she burst into tears.

She fell against him, and Aedhir shrugged loose of his captor's grasp. He stiffened as Wen pressed her cheek against his chest, weeping against his coat, and then he slowly drew his arms about her. "Father?" he whispered, and his voice quavered. She felt his hands cup her face, lifting her gaze, and he stared at her, his eyes filled with tears. "It cannot be," he said softly, and he stroked his fingertips against his hair. His hands were shaking, his breath fluttering in short, stunned gasps. "Ae...Aelwen...?"

"I...I wanted to tell you," she said. "I was frightened. I did not know how. I thought you would..."

"Aelwen?" Aedhir whispered again, cradling her cheeks against his palms as she nodded. He began to weep, his voice escaping him in a soft, agonized sound.

"It is me," she told him, nodding. "Father, it...it is me, it is Aelwen."

"Mother Above," he gasped, and he seized her, wrapping his arms tightly about her. He embraced her, tucking his face against her hair as he wept. The strength abandoned his legs in his absolute shock, and he collapsed to the ground, kneeling in the mud and snow, drawing her with him.

"Aelwen!" Aedhir said, clutching at her, kissing her hair. He shuddered in her arms, and she wept all the harder to listen to the hoarse, agonized sound of his release. "Aelwen...oh...my Aelwen...!"

When the men moved to separate them, to draw them to their feet, Aedhir glared at them, shrugging his shoulders fiercely, and holding Wen tightly. "Do not touch us!" he shouted, tears streaming down his cheeks. "By my breath, if one of you touches her again, I will wrench your heart from your rot damn breast with my bear hands! Keep away from us!"

"Ek beith, thu lathith tha," Tacita said quietly, turning to the man, Kolbrun. She held out her hands to him, pleading, her eyes filled with tears. "Hon er dottir at hinn. Hann vidar eigi vaetta. Ek beith thik."

"Latith tha," Kolbrun said to the others, and they immediately withdrew from Aedhir and Wen, looking at him with puzzled expressions. "Their eru fethgin."

The other men nodded their heads at this, making little "ahh" noises in their throats, as if all was explained to them now. The strangers might have understood, but Aedhir's crew did not.

"What the duchan is going on?" Thierley said. His captor had turned loose of his mouth, and loosened his hold upon him. He shrugged his way free, sparing a glower over his shoulder as he tugged the lapels of his greatcoat into place again. "Captain, what are you talking about?"

Aedhir took Aelwen's face between his hands. He smiled at her, pressing his lips against her brow. "Oh, my girl," he whispered. He turned to look over his shoulder at Thierley. "This is Aelwen," he said, drawing her against him, holding her. "This...Thierley, this is my daughter."

Chapter Twelve

Their hands were bound behind them, their wrists lashed together tightly against the small of their backs. While a party of twenty-five Enghan took to Qoyina Bay aboard one of their longboats in pursuit of the crewmen who had escaped, the others forced Aedhir and his party into the woods, leading them away from the beach.

The man who spoke the common tongue, Kolbrun Spaki had left them. Aedhir had tried repeatedly, insistently to explain to Kolbrun who they were, how they had happened to stumble upon the Enghan, but Kolbrun did not pay him any heed. At last, apparently tired or aggravated by Aedhir's persistence, he had said, "Whoever you are, and whatever your purpose may be, it remains that you are strangers among us. What is to become of you is up to my Fylkir, Eirik Gerpir to decide. I must go now, and seek his counsel, advise him of these circumstances."

A warrior led one of the enormous weasels Aedhir had seen upon the battlefield from the woods, presenting the thick straps of reins secured to its leather bridle to Kolbrun. Up close and personal, the animal was even more immense; each massive paw was as broad as Aedhir's chest, armed with five long, hooked claws. Its spine hunkered above its front shoulders in a distinctive bow. Its snout was tapered, its ears poised back against the cap of its skull. Its fur was mostly black, mottled in places with deep hues of brown, with pale stars on its chin and breast and tawny markings on its browline and snout. It had a mouthful of purposeful, sharp teeth and its nose quivered as it drew the unfamiliar scents of the Tiralainnian sailors from the air.

Kolbrun had hooked his foot in the stirrup, swung himself onto the saddle against the creature's back, and off he had gone, the weasel loping with astonishing speed and grace.

Without Kolbrun to communicate with and for them, they were left on their own as their captors shoved them forward, keeping their stumbling paces brisk, marching them deep into the forest. Whenever Tacita tried to speak to them in their tongue, they would bark at her sharply, subduing her into silence. They were led in close quarters, under heavy guard forcing them down steep, cragged embankments, and Aedhir realized they

were bringing them into the valley, to the battlefield. He lost sight of Pryce, Thierley, Odhran and the others in the crowd, but had been allowed to remain near to Tacita and Aelwen. The two young women huddled at each of Aedhir's shoulders, drawing close to him, both frightened and distressed.

"Why did you leave the boat?" he whispered to Aelwen, pained. "Hoah, Aelwen, why did you not stay on the boat?"

"I could not leave you, Father," she whispered back, pressing her cheek against his chest. "And I thought Tacita had betrayed us. I thought she had led us into a trap."

Tacita blinked at her, startled.

Aedhir leaned back so that he could meet Wen's gaze. "Why would you think such a thing?"

"I heard her speaking to them—in their language—and I thought she knew them," Wen said, lowering her eyes. "I thought she had led us to them on purpose. I am sorry, Tacita."

"The Enghan language is known to me. The Enghan are not," Tacita said quietly. "I begged them not to hurt us. I told them we were not their enemies."

"Bloody lot of good it did," Aedhir said with a frown, glowering at the nearest Enghan.

"I am a woman, Aedhir," Tacita told him quietly. "A woman of obvious Torachan heritage, bearing the mark of an imperial catasta. I speak their tongue, but that does not mean they must believe or trust me. They have no reason to. Perhaps you will fare better when you speak with their leader. Surely that is where they are bringing us. You are of Median descent; perhaps they will find this less—"

Odhran cried out from behind them, startling them. "Pryce!"

Aedhir whirled in alarm at Odhran's cry. He caught fleeting sight of Pryce on his knees against the ground, reeling. The two young men were being led near to one another, and Pryce had stumbled, losing his footing on the snow-dusted gravel and granite. With his hands bound behind him, he had been helpless to catch himself, and he had hit the ground hard, barking the side of his head against a corner of stone. His temple had been bloodied, and he had nearly knocked the wits from himself.

"Pryce!" Aedhir exclaimed, aghast.

“Thu risr,” one of the Enghan said to Pryce, jerking him to his feet. Pryce stumbled dizzily and crumpled again, and the Enghan man wasted no more time. He reached down and closed one broad hand against the scruff of Pryce’s neck, the other against Pryce’s belt. He hoisted the younger man off the ground, hefting him over his shoulder as he might have a sack of grain.

“Get your hands off of him!” Aedhir shouted. Two Enghan caught him by the shoulders and forced him backwards as he struggled against them. “I said get your rot hands off of him! Pryce!” When he tried to turn again, he felt one of the Enghan drive his elbow firmly, painfully against the middle of his back.

“Thu hroer,” he snapped at Aedhir. “Kallar eigi.”

They were brought into the valley, out upon the bloodied ground of the battlefield. From his vantage along the cragged overlook, when Aedhir had first seen the Torachan camp, the carnage had been apparent and ghastly. Standing in the midst of it, being forced to step around the corpses of fallen legionnaires, the ruined heaps of their tents left him breathless with shock. It had been twenty years since the First War; two decades since he had last seen anything so gruesome and horrifying, but at least he had those memories to prepare his heart and mind, to steel himself for the startling proximity. With the exception of Thierley, who had also served in the First War, none of the younger crewmen had ever seen anything like what lay before them in the valley. Wen whimpered softly, her eyes wide with horror and she shied against her father, trembling.

“It is alright,” Aedhir whispered to her, turning his face, brushing his lips against her hair. “Do not look at them, Aelwen. It is alright.”

“Who are they?” she asked softly.

“They are Torachans,” Tacita breathed, ashen with shock. She stared all around her, her blue eyes enormous. “They are Torachan legionnaires.”

“Butchering cowards,” Thierley said from behind them. “They could not take the empire in broad daylight, so they snuck up on them in the dark, while they lay sleeping. Rot savage bastards. These poor lads did not have a hope.”

They were delivered to a large tent toward the center of the encampment. This had apparently served as the quarters for the Torachan’s commanding officer, and a

place where his subordinates would gather for strategy sessions and planning. A simple cot rested against one of the heavy canvas tent walls, while the rest of the broad circumference within the tent was filled with tables covered with maps and charts, correspondences and writing implements. The ten crewmen from the *a'Maorga* were led into the center of the tent and shoved roughly together, forced to drop clumsily to their knees.

The men were frightened. They cowered together, wide-eyed, damp and shivering, staring all about them with ashen faces and stricken eyes.

"They are going to kill us," Euan whispered. "Are they not, Odhran? They are going to kill us."

"I do not know, Euan," Odhran said softly.

"I thought you knew them," Duffin said, his brows drawing. He squirmed against his ropes. "I thought the Enghan were your favorites, Odhran—you knew them well, you said."

"As well as someone from Tiralainn can know them, yes, Duff," Odhran said. "No one from our land has met an Enghan in millennia. I only know what I have read of them, what the Abhacan have told us."

"They are going to bloody kill us," Semias said, frowning. "You saw those legionnaires in the field, Euan—do you think they will spare us any other rotted fate?"

"Shut your mouths and swallow it down, the lot of you," Thierley growled. "You are Crown Navy, trussed or not. No Naval man meets the Good Mother simpering like a distraught woman. Muster some mettle now, lads."

Aedhir wrenched himself away from the Enghan and rushed toward Pryce. His captor had dumped him unceremoniously to the floor of the tent, and Aedhir fell onto his knees before the young man, twisting his hands desperately against his bindings.

"Pryce..." he whispered, his voice hoarse as he stared at the wound on Pryce's temple. "Hoah, lad...Pryce, are...are you...?"

"I...I am alright, Aedhir," Pryce said. He sat up slowly, grimacing visibly.

The Enghan seized Aedhir roughly, hauling him backwards. "Let go of me!" Aedhir yelled, twisting his body, shrugging his shoulders. They jerked him to his feet,

and he stumbled, cursing at them. “Let me go—he is my boy! He is hurt! Let me go to him!”

“Haetta, Grettir,” said a tall, broad-shouldered man as he ducked his head, brushing beneath a flap of canvas to enter the tent. “Hann er mathr reithr, er haettiligri eigi.”

The Enghan immediately released Aedhir, who staggered in place to regain his footing. He stared at this new and unfamiliar man who approached.

“It is a brave man, or a fool who would venture north of the empire and into our lands,” the man said to Aedhir. He spoke perfect, flawless Torachan, and Aedhir blinked at him, momentarily startled and off-guard. He was no older in appearance than Aedhir, brawny and handsome. He had removed his leather helm, and his hair spilled down his shoulders toward the middle of his back in a tumble of russet-colored waves, drawn back from his temples and the crown of his head with three slender plaits. His beard was gathered at the base of his chin in a single, thick braid that fell nearly to his chest. His eyes were brown, and not unkind, and he regarded Aedhir with curious interest. His face was peppered with dried blood; gore had crusted on his tunic and leather armor plates. Like the others, he carried a dagger, axe and a large, unusual sword against his hip, a broad length of blade with thick, short quillons and a one-handed hilt capped with a large, ornate pommel that seemed to be inscribed with numerous, deeply etched runes.

The man had obviously overheard Aedhir shouting at the guards, and he looked at Pryce for a long moment. “And an even braver man who would bring his son with him into such circumstances,” he remarked. He walked toward Pryce, nodding at one of his men, who obediently seized hold of Pryce’s arms and hauled him to his feet.

“Take your hands from him—” Aedhir began, his brows narrowed as he moved forward. He was stopped by two Enghan who grabbed him roughly and forced him to his knees. Aedhir glared at their leader. “Do not hurt him,” he said. “Whatever you want—I am here. Do it to me. Do not hurt my boy.”

“You call him your boy,” the man remarked. He reached out and ran the cuff of his fingers gently against Pryce’s cheek. “Yet I see no resemblance.”

Pryce jerked his head away, his brows furrowed. “Do not touch me.”

The man smiled at him. "Hvatr litt harfagri," he murmured, brushing his fingertips against Pryce's hair, chuckling as Pryce ducked away from him again, the cleft between his brows deepening.

"Your men are all very brave..." the man said to Aedhir as Kolbrun Spaki stepped into the tent behind him, accompanied by the young blond man Aedhir recognized from the forest, the one who had thrust his hand against Wen's crotch. "And your women besides."

He looked at Wen. "My men have told me this one is your daughter," he said to Aedhir. "Yet you knew her not until we discovered it for you upon the beach. Are you certain the lad is yours? You seem to have difficulty determining such matters."

"Pryce is as much my son as Aelwen is my daughter," Aedhir said, his brows furrowed. "The resemblance makes no difference. If you touch either of them, you will answer to me."

The man raised his brow at him, seeming more amused than offended by Aedhir's anger. "Forgive my discourtesy," he said. He closed his left hand into a fist, cupping his right hand about it. He drew his joined hands to his breast and nodded his head once, offering greeting. "My name is Eirik Gerpir," he said. "I am leader to these people, Hersir and Fylkir of the Rikr'kyn, from Enthimok." He indicated Kolbrun and the blond man. "You have met Kolbrun Spaki. This is Thorir Oargi, Hersir and Fulkir of the Dalr'kyn."

"I am Aedhir Fainne," Aedhir replied. "Captain of the *C.N.S. a'Maorga*, a merchant frigate in service to the Crown Navy of Tiralainn. These are my crewmen, my friends and family. We are not servants of the empire, and we mean no harm or trespass to you. Release us."

"What is this 'Tiralainn' you keep speaking of?" Eirik asked. "That name is unknown to us."

"It is to the west," Aedhir said. "Across the sea."

"Alfheim," Odhran said quietly to Eirik. "What Captain Fainne calls Tiralainn, sir, you would know as *Alfheim*."

Eirik and Thorir exchanged startled glances. "Alfheim..." Thorir breathed, his eyes widening.

“What?” Aedhir asked, quietly, glancing at Odhran, his brow raised. “What is Alfheim?”

“The land of Elves, sir,” Odhran said. “It is part of their lore—they called Tirgeimhreadh *Nidavellir*, the realm of Dwarves; the area they now call Mikill’fit was *Jotunheim*, the land of the Giants. They are seafarers, Captain, and the Abhacan believe they used to sail west frequently across the Muir Fuar, into what they called Alfheim, the land of Elves. That is how the Abhacan knew to come there thousands of years ago. The Enghan told them of it.”

“You know of our legends, Bjorn’strangi,” Eirik said to Odhran, and then he glanced at Tacita. “Our language, and of us, it would seem. And yet we know nothing of you.”

“Their horfa eigi sem alfa at mik,” Thorir said.

“At mik ne,” Eirik said, with a nod. He met Aedhir’s gaze. “Thorir does not think you look like Elves. I do not think so, either.”

“More than Elves call Tiralainn home,” Aedhir said.

The corner of Eirik’s mouth lifted slightly. “So it would seem,” he remarked. A small boy of no more than ten years of age ducked beneath the tent flap, carrying a large, filled waterskin between his arms. He stopped upon the threshold of the tent, blinking at the unfamiliar strangers with wide, frightened eyes.

“It is alright, Bjarki,” Eirik said, looking down at the boy. His smile softened kindly and he reached out, tousling his fingertips against the child’s hair. “Bring it to that table there, with the bowls. I shall tend to pouring it myself.”

“Ja, Fathir,” the boy said, nodding his head. He did not tear his eyes from Aedhir or the others as he scampered across the tent, clutching the swollen hide pouch of water in his hands. He hefted it with a small grunt, letting it slap onto one of the tables covered with Torachan maps. Four large wooden bowls had been set there, along with several bundles of tightly wrapped linens. The boy turned, blinked apprehensively at Aedhir and then scurried back toward Eirik, shying behind his hip.

“Thu bithar fyrir mik, sonr,” Eirik told Bjarki, looking down and cradling his palm against the cap of the lad’s pate. He nodded his chin toward the tent flap. “Thu dugr Skalli fekk branda.”

The boy beamed brightly, smiling at his father. “Ja, Fathir!” he exclaimed, seeming very pleased as he turned and hurried from the tent.

“What did he say?” Aedhir asked Tacita quietly, turning to her.

“He told the boy to wait for him,” she replied. “To help a bald man gather swords, I think. He said *skalli*. It means *bald*.”

“It is a name,” Odhran said softly. “A nickname. I read once that Enghan do not use surnames as we do, or the empire. They are denoted by patrilineal descent—as the Gaeilge Elves in Tiralainn’s southrealm once were—or by nickname.”

“He called the boy *sonr*,” Tacita whispered to Aedhir. “It means *son*. And the boy called him *fathir*—he is the boy’s father.”

Two other Enghan men stepped inside the tent, their arms laden with the an’dagan and isneachan taken from Aedhir and his officers.

“Hvat er hinn?” Eirik asked them.

“Okunnigr seithr,” Thorir replied, as the men opened their arms and let the pistols and rifles clatter noisily against the nearest table. “Thau eru keflia sem gera reykr ok eldr.”

“What did he say?” Aedhir asked, glancing at Tacita as Eirik walked over and examined the weapons, his brows lifted with interest.

“He said the weapons are strange magic,” she replied. “Pieces of wood that make smoke and fire.”

Eirik lifted one of the pistols in hand, studying it as he cradled it between his hands. Thorir took another, curling his fingers about the grip and holding it as he had observed Aedhir and the others in the forest. “Sem hinn, Eirik,” he said, demonstrating the proper grip as if to tell his friend, *like this, Eirik*.

“Hoah, tell the bloody bastards they are nose scratchers, Captain,” Thierley said softly, leaning toward Aedhir. “Tell them to rub theirs noses and pull the trigger.”

“Kolbrun, go and see if you cannot find some dry clothes, some kyrtila,” Eirik said in the common tongue. He set the pistol down and crossed the tent to another table, unfastening the heavy hide bracers strapped about his forearms. He dropped them beside the waterskin and wooden bowls and removed his gloves in turn. He then set about unfettering the network of straps and buckles that held his leather plate armor

draped against his shoulders, wrapped about his torso. "Our guests are wet, and it is cold. They will freeze before nightfall if they do not change."

"Ja, Eirik," Kolbrun said, nodding his chin. He turned on his boot heel and ducked beneath the tent flap, taking his leave.

"Tell me, Aedhir Fainne, man of Alfheim," Eirik said as he unfastened his belt, removing it from his waist, letting it fall to the table with his sword, dagger and knife still sheathed and fettered to it. "What are you doing so far from your Elf realm and into Engjold?"

Without the armor on Eirik's shoulders in place, Aedhir could see the coat was sleeveless, made of thick panels of hide stitched together. The entire garment was lined with thick wool fleece; as Eirik shrugged it from his torso and hefted it in his hand, dropping it against the table, Aedhir heard a distinctive, metallic clinking and realized it was also lined with chain mail beneath the fleece. Beneath this heavy coat, Eirik wore a long, bone-colored linen tunic that fell to just below the crests of his hips. The collar of the tunic was cut wide, nearly open across the shoulders, revealing another woolen undershirt, this one dun-colored, with a keyhole-cut neckline. He ducked his head and drew both shirts from his body simultaneously, turning them inside out against his hands. His long hair swept forward into his face, and when he stood upright again, he shook his head, letting his hair spill into disheveled place against his bare spine.

"I am looking for my friend, who traveled with me aboard my ship," Aedhir said. "He was taken from us in Capua by a group of Oirat. We have been following them for almost two weeks."

"Oirat?" Eirik looked at him, his brow arched. He poured some water from the hide bag into one of the wooden bowls as Thorir joined him at the table, shrugging his way out of his own plate armor and overcoat.

"Yes," Aedhir said, his brows drawing slightly at Eirik's implied doubt. "We encountered a group of them in Capua, and they took my friend against his will. I mean to get him back."

"You are on the wrong side of the Qoyina Bay to be hunting Oirat," Eirik said.

Thorir glanced at Eirik at this and smirked, uttering a soft snort of laughter. Aedhir blinked, startled to realize the young man could understand the common tongue. Thorir

had pretended not to understand a word Aedhir offered him; he had spoken nothing except his native tongue, even in Eirik's company, but apparently he knew the Torachan speech well enough to recognize a jab when he heard it.

"It was my idea to come to Sube," Aedhir said with a frown. "The Oirat are traveling by longboat, like the yours, the ones we saw on the beach. I think the Oirat mean to bring him into the mountains. I believed they meant the Khar, but when I saw your boats, I thought I must have made a mistake."

"You did," Eirik said. He cupped his hands together in the water and leaned over, splashing his face and beard. He rubbed his fingertips against his cheeks and scalp, scrubbing at the dried blood.

"I thought my friend was here," Aedhir said, his frown deepening. "I was willing to take the risk, if it meant we might find him, rescue him."

"It does not sound like the Oirat I have known," Eirik said, rubbing his fingertips against his beard and looking at Aedhir. He took a square of linen and used it to pat his face dry. "Leaving their home across the bay, traveling so far south into the empire as to reach Capua, taking a man against his will into the mountains. Why would they do such a thing?"

"I do not know," Aedhir replied.

"And what would bring you to Capua to begin with, Aedhir Fainne?" Eirik closed his hands into fists and rested his knuckles on the table as he leaned forward. "Why would you cross the sea, venture so far from your home?"

"My friend is an ambassador," Aedhir said, meeting his gaze. "My King would trade with the empire, and my friend stood in his stead in Cneas, bartering agreements with the empire. We were sailing for Cneas when a storm damaged my ship, forcing us to dock at Capua for repairs."

"That er sleitu," Thorir said to Eirik, dunking a linen his own bowl of water and rubbing it across his bare chest and neck, mopping beneath his arms. "Vinr af Torach er vera Torachan, ok fjandi at oss."

"What did he say?" Aedhir asked Tacita, making no effort to turn to her in pretense of subtlety, or lowering his voice in discretion. Thorir could speak and comprehend Torachan, and Aedhir realized fully well what he was playing at. *He can*

understand us, but does not want us to understand him, he thought, frowning. *Bastard rot.*

“He said it is a trick, that ‘a friend of Torach is to be a Torachan,’ and an enemy to them,” Tacita said. “He thinks you are lying.”

Aedhir turned to Thorir, locking eyes with the younger man. “And I think he is a damn rot butcher,” he said. “A coward and a murderer who would assault men in the middle of the night, slaughter them while they roused from their beds rather than face them in the light of the sun, with honor.”

Thorir blinked at him, and then his brows cleaved a deep line against the bridge of his nose. “You will answer for that, Torachan,” he seethed in perfect articulation of the common tongue. He stepped around the table, his hand moving toward his hip, his fingers curling about the hilt of his sword.

Eirik reached out, hooking his hand against Thorir’s arm, staying him. “These men, as you call them, were unfit to lick bergelmir scat from the boot soles of our most fledgling of warriors,” he said to Aedhir. “We did as we did out of necessity—to survive—not out of cowardice.”

“My Poppa used to be fond to say ‘if it smells like dung, looks like dung and draws a fly or two, then only a damn bloody idiot would call it a cabbage,’” Thierley said from behind Aedhir

“You butchered those Torachans,” Aedhir said. “You led us through the bloody carnage to bring us here—some of them did not even have enough warning to pull their boots on, much less draw their swords from their scabbards.”

“Three months ago, those same Torachans massacred my byr—burned my village to the ground,” Thorir said. His voice was sharp and loud, his brows furrowed. “They attacked our homes in the heart of the night, rousing us from our beds without warning—with no time to draw our boots on, as you put it, or our axes from our belts. One hundred and forty-seven left dead by Torachan blades and arrows that night. They deliberately went for our women and children—if they cannot defeat us in open, honorable battle, then they mean to keep us from breeding, from raising new generations.”

He strode towards Aedhir, his eyes ablaze, his fists clenched. “My wife was one they butchered!” he snapped, his voice hoarse and agonized. “And my parents—they ran my father through and then cut my mother’s throat open as she wept over his corpse.”

The young man’s face had twisted with grief and rage, and he pressed his lips together in a stubborn, defiant line, meeting Aedhir’s gaze. “And when those of us who survived came among Eirik’s kyn, his father Thrand, their leader welcomed us all gladly,” he said. “Six weeks later, their village fell to the legions, too.”

Aedhir looked at the two men, stunned and stricken. Eirik met his gaze. “Thorir and I are unwilling heirs,” he said, his voice quiet. “Both of us left with those mantles our fathers bore when they were murdered by the empire. No matter where we have fled, no matter our efforts, the Torachans have followed us, relentlessly, mercilessly.”

“And behind these soldiers—” Thorir shoved his forefinger emphatically toward the tent flap. “—there are thousands more, legions in full crossing Eng proper north from Ulus, making their way west across Enthimonk, coming for us, drawing closer day by day.

“Do not speak to us of cowardice or honor. We gave the Torachans as they have proffered—nothing more, and nothing less. Tyr, the god of war and his brother Vidar, of vengeance blessed us in our efforts, and the goddess of the Niflheim underworld, Hel has harvested them to their deserved eternities.”

“Frithr, Thorir,” Eirik said gently. He stepped near to the young man, placing his hand against his shoulder. Thorir fell quiet, lowering his gaze to the ground. “The pain is yet new to him,” Eirik told Aedhir. “He means no discourtesy.”

“I am sorry for his loss,” Aedhir said. “And for yours. But my crew and I played no part in it. We are not Torachan.”

“I know you are not,” Eirik said, and Thorir blinked at him, startled. “Ogurr and his men returned from Suthr Nab at the mouth of the Subean Forks shortly after you left for the knarrs,” Eirik told him. “We had sent men to the edge of Sube along the Chagan Sea to keep watch, in case the Torachans sent tall ships down the Forks. They have been daring lately, and we put nothing past them anymore. They told me the sea god Aegir delivered this group of Oirat you have described. They saw them turn south at the

forks, into Tolui Bay—and they saw you, as well. They brought those tidings to me only a short time ago.”

Aedhir flinched as though he had been slapped. “They turned south...?” he asked softly, stricken. He turned to Thierley, his eyes flown wide. *Oh, Mother Above, no*, he thought in dismay. It had never occurred to him that the Oirat might be traveling to Tolui Bay. Qoyina Bay led into Ulus, into their own, familiar lands, as well as into the Khar mountains, and Aedhir had assumed that this is where they would go; this is where they would bring Rhyden. “They sailed into Tolui Bay? When? When did your men see them?”

“Yesterday, midafternoon,” Eirik replied. “Though they could not be certain it was Oirat they saw. We have scopes we have taken from the Torachans in the past, tools we use to look across great distances, but the Forks are broad, the mouth of Tolui all the more. They saw a knarr, a vessel like ours, and thought it must be Oirat. We have traded boats to them in the past, and they use them upon the water to fish.”

Mother Above, they took Rhyden to Tolui Bay, Aedhir thought. Yesterday, midafternoon.

He nearly groaned aloud in disbelief. The Khar mountains in Lydia butted nearly to the water’s edge in Tolui Bay. There were at least one hundred and fifty miles of shoreline along Tolui’s broad basin. There was no telling where the Oirat might have brought their boat aground along its measure; even if the tide had not obliterated evidence of their beaching, the Oirat now had nearly a full day’s lead over Aedhir. They could be well on their way into the Khar—and Aedhir did not have the slightest inkling as to where they might be going, or what route they meant to follow to bring them there.

“Mother Above,” he whispered, lowering his head, staring at his lap. *Rhyden*, he thought, anguished. *I have failed. Mother Above, I will never find you now.*

“Why did you not bloody tell us this from the start?” Thierley snapped. He could see Aedhir’s pain and shock; it was apparent to them all, and he frowned, dismayed for his friend. “If you knew we were not damn Torachans, why did you not just bloody say so, you bastard?”

“Let us go,” Aedhir looked up at Eirik, pleading. “Please, cut us loose. We must get to Tolui Bay. We have to find my friend.”

“I know you are not Torachans, but you are strangers to me nonetheless,” Eirik told him. “Thorir is right—if you indeed are friends to the empire, you are no friends of mine. I do not trust you, Aedhir Fainne. I do not know what you want upon Engjold soil, but I mean to find out.”

“I have told you what I want,” Aedhir said, twisting his hands futilely against his bindings. “If I was any friend to the bloody damn empire, would I be out in a longboat without their company, trolling your waters? We trade with them—that does not make us bloody rot friends or allies. Turn us loose—let us go.”

“And if I did, how would you reach Tolui?” Eirik asked him. “Your boat is gone—your crew has left you behind. Even if Thorir’s men find them, catch them on the water, they will kill them all and burn your vessel. That is our way, and there is nothing I can do to prevent it; no way to get word to them otherwise. Your boat is gone, and, I would presume, your supplies. How would you cross the Khar mountains in the height of winter without food or water, clothing or coats?”

Aedhir met his gaze, glaring at him, his jaw locked at a grim set. “You cannot keep us here.”

“I do not mean to keep you here,” Eirik replied. He returned to the table with the washbasins atop it, and began to pull on a new pair of tunics. “Our people, those who are left of our kyn are waiting for us north of here, in the byr of Lith. We are traveling from there to the fortified city of Elbeuf in the Keiliselgr Fjell. My uncle, Hamal Bildr, Hersir of the Berg’kyn, will give us sanctuary. You are coming with us.”

“No,” Aedhir said.

“I will stand before Hamal’s council of eldri with Thorir,” Eirik said. “They shall decide why the goddess Urd might have brought you among us...and what is meant to become of you.”

“No,” Aedhir said again, jerking his arms angrily against his bindings.

Several young boys entered the tent, bearing bundles of clothing. The children looked anxiously at the strangers as they deposited the clothes on a tabletop, and then scurried from the tent, wide-eyed and breathless.

“Leysith tha,” Eirik said to his guards. “Latith tha bua ok bindith tha apr. Vegith tha ef vega a’moti ythr.” He turned to the crew of the *a’Maorga*. “Your women will be

brought to a place of proper modesty that they might dress themselves. You will each be unfettered in turn to change into these dry vestments, and then you will be bound again. If you fight us, we will cut your throats and leave you to the narsana.” He met Aedhir’s gaze. “Dress quickly. We are leaving within the hour. It is four full days’ journey to Lith on the Holavik bay.”

“We are not going with you,” Aedhir said. “Let us go. Even if the Oirat have taken my friend into the Khar, we can still—”

“If they have taken him into the mountains, he is lost to you already,” Eirik snapped. “You could set sail this moment to Tolui Bay on the fastest knarr in my fleet, and you would still be too late. Close your eyes, tell him farewell in your heart and hold fast and fondly to your memories of him.” He motioned with his hand toward Thorir and the Enghan guards. “That is all any of us have left of our loved ones. It is never enough, but sometimes, it is all that there is.”

“You bastard,” Aedhir seethed as Eirik turned, leaving the tent with Thorir. “You rot damn bastard.”

Chapter Thirteen

While Aedhir and his crew set up camp along the dusk-draped shores of Sube, unaware of the harsh introduction to the Enghan that awaited them the next day, Khidyr Shriagal stood along the shores of Tengriss Lake hundreds of miles away, just north of the city of Kharhorin in the Ulusian Taiga territory. While the Oirat sat around their small campfire in the woods surrounding Tolui Bay, waiting for spits of alagh'ghaquai meat to roast over the coals, Khidyr and her shamans paced and chanted, trying to channel the spirit of the Tengriss.

It was a dangerous business, the channeling of spirits, attempted by very few shamans throughout history on occasions even more rare than the ritual of soliqu. Khidyr knew this; there was not a shaman who drew breath who was unaware of the risks, and she was frightened.

Shaman rituals and practices were designed to serve in accordance with the Tegsh. Ami spirits were the most common forms invoked, and to channel another ami was to invite that spirit into a shaman's form, to share it with the shaman's own suni and ami sulds. By this alone, the practice violated the Tegsh; the human form was simply not meant to harbor more than one ami at a time and it was unnatural for a body to possess more than equal measures of suni and ami.

Something new is with them, Khidyr had told Yisun. Something powerful—a sort of ayy, or nature spirit, either an endur sky suld or a gazriin ezen earthen spirit, I could not tell. The man-falcon is guarded by something I have never known before—a spirit seized with more hiimori than a thousand yeke shamans.

Then find a spirit that is stronger! Yisun had cried within Khidyr's mind. Find your own damn ayy spirit and channel it! Whatever it takes, Khidyr. We are not turning back.

As seldom as other amis were channeled, inviting an ayy into one's form was even more unheard of—and the consequences to the shaman could be horrific. Ayy were seni sulds, ancient ancestral souls that might have served as uthas within families at one time, but had been elevated in power and spiritual status. They inhabited places within earth and sky, including mountains, bodies of water, rocks, trees. They were

extraordinarily powerful spirits who had the capacity to conquer a host shaman's ami, trap and prevent it from leaving for the spirit tree. By doing this, they forced the shaman's ami into qarang'qui—a state of unending, inescapable darkness. Their amis would linger in the mortal plane, restless and helpless in their forms while the channeled ayy controlled their bodies, their minds.

Ayy were generally neutral spirits, if not self-serving, bound to earthen or elemental things, and not people. Shamans could beseech ayy for help or intercession, but only if they could demonstrate such action served the ayy in some manner. The man-falcon with the Oirat, the one from this place to the west called Tiralainn had an ayy spirit to protect him. It was bound to him deliberately, fiercely, and it guarded him—and anyone around him. Khidyr could not fathom of the hiimori the man-falcon must surely possess to keep an ayy as his utha suld, but she knew Yisun was right. They could not turn back; this was Targutai's destiny. The only way to conquer the ayy spirit was to find another to stand against it, one with a vested interest to see Targutai claim the dragons, one who would feel its interests would be served by his triumph as the Negh.

And that was precisely what Khidyr had done.

For millennia, the Khahl shamans had believed that the spirit of Mongoljin, the Qatun of Kagan Borjigidal, and the mother of the great Duua resided as an ayy within the broad expanse of Tengriss Lake's dark waters. Mongoljin had drowned in Tengriss almost ten years after Duua assumed the throne of the Ulusian empire, although the exact circumstances of her unfortunate and untimely end had been lost throughout history. It was believed that Mongoljin's ayy remained here, asleep beneath the waters that had stolen life and breath from her, but that she could be called upon through rituals, invoked through powerful incantations. A shrine had been erected on the shores of the lake in Mongoljin's honor, a towering pile of stones called an oboo. Shamans used the site as a place of meditation to beseech Mongoljin; stones were added in quiet rituals to her oboo, and shamans paced about the pillar, offering her incantations whenever they sought her guidance or intercession. More than any other ayy in all of the Bith, perhaps, Mongoljin would want to see the Khahl know victory over the Oirat, Targutai fulfill his destiny as the Negh and the Ulusian empire restored under his rule.

Khidyr had brought the remaining eleven members of her shaman council from Kharhorin to help her in her task. They had traveled in a pilgrimage from the royal city, a daylong journey that had brought them to the sacred site of Mongoljin's oboo, and the shores of the massive lake. Khidyr had offered no explanations for their abrupt departure from the palace to Aulus Tertius; such had not been needed. The young consul remained so dazed and bewildered by the effects of serekeum, so exhausted from the efforts of the concubines, Khidyr could have told him precisely why she was leaving, and what her intentions were, and he would not have cared a whit.

Yisun and the Khahl had already reached the mouth of Tolui Bay. Through her rapport with Yisun, Khidyr could tell the progress of the Khahl party. They were observing a wary distance from the Uru'ut, and they were following the Ulusian shoreline. The Uru'ut had a few hours' lead on them, and Targutai was restless because of this, anxious to catch up to them. Yisun was impatient like her son, but wise enough to know they could not follow too closely lest they risk detection by the Oirat, or worse, the man-falcon's ayy spirit. They needed their own powerful spirit guardian before chancing another encounter with the ayy. They had little time to spare, and Khidyr knew Yisun was depending on her.

What I am asking of you is for the good of the kingdom, and the Khahl. See it done. Do not fail Targutai—or me.

Khidyr cradled a rock between her hands. It was considered precious among the Ulusians—qara'qada, a black stone that they had used to make spearpoints and arrow heads for thousands of years. When cut, qara'qada cleaved in precise, sharp planes, with edges that were as keen as any masterfully hewn sword or knife blade. In bygone centuries, qara'qada had been more valuable to Ulusians than even silver or gold. Mongoljin would consider it yet of significant value, and a worthy offering to her.

Khidyr approached the oboo. The other shamans stood around her in a broad circumference, twisting their wrists and letting the rhythm of their small, hand-held ceremonial drums lift skyward in a thrumming, harmonious cadence. They murmured and chanted as she stepped slowly forward. She was anxious, but struggled to quell her fears.

It is for Yisun, she told herself. I am doing this for Yisun.

The oboo stood at least ten feet high. Khidyr knelt, offering her stone at the base of the mound. She lowered her head and closed her eyes. “Great Qatun’Eke,” she said softly to the stones. “I beseech you for your guidance, your aid and your strength. We beseech you for your wisdom, your power.”

She stood and walked in a slow, deliberate circle about the oboo, chanting to herself, repeating her words of implore, her incantations over and over. She walked around the oboo three times and then stopped before the water, dropping to her knees along the cold, damp shoreline.

They had been there most of the afternoon, reciting incantations and performing the ceremonies of an ancient, beseeching ritual called takiqu. Daylight waned into the shadows of evening; for hours now, they had offered stones each in turn. They had paced about the oboo. They had offered sacrifices, songs, incantations and drum measures. They had burned incense offerings; they had cut their own fingers upon knife blades and soaked the wounds in the lake in desperate implore. They had swallowed elixirs and banes that were meant to augment their hiimori, open their minds and eyes to the spirit world. They had cried out, beseeching; they had whispered them, wept them, and so far, despite all of their combined efforts, Mongoljin had not come.

Please, Khidyr thought. Please, great Mother Mongoljin, help us.

The water lapped against the cold, muddy beach in reply. Khidyr felt tears sting beneath her eyelids. Yisun was growing anxious. She could sense it within her mind. Yisun did not understand that such efforts took time—and often did not work, no matter how diligently shamans tried. Yisun did not care that what Khidyr wanted to attempt was dangerous. She cared only about the dragons, and about Targutai fulfilling his destiny. She was depending on Khidyr, and to her point of view, her restless perception, Khidyr was failing her.

Please, Khidyr thought again. She opened her eyes and stared out across the blackened plane of water. She had drank a vial of potent jegudun’ure elixir to induce visions, to help her eyes become aware of the spirits around her, and the waning light of the sun through the grey clouds overhead danced against the surface of the lake, like fingertips aglow, fluttering beneath the water, mesmerizing her. Vachir, can she hear me? Is she with us? We are desperate for her aid—tell her we beg it of her.

Vachir had served as utha guide for many long generations of her family. He was a powerful spirit, one who ordinarily spoke readily to Khidyr, revealing himself through visions and prophecies. He had been restless all day, throughout the takiq ritual; Vachir knew what Khidyr meant to attempt was dangerous and he did not approve. He offered no reply to her, his presence within her mind sensed, but remaining silent.

Help me, Mongoljin, Khidyr pleaded, closing her eyes again. *Help your people. It is for the good of the kingdom—the good of the Khahl, and your sacred kin, Targutai.*

Within her mind, she felt a sudden stirring, a vibration of energy, like the thrumming of a lute string plucked. Her eyes flew open, her breath halting beneath her breast. The sound of the drumming immediately fell quiet behind her; whatever it was, the other shamans sensed it as well, and they grew still at its presence.

“Tere kurkua—ayu ende dagaqu bide,” one of the shamans breathed, his voice tremulous with wonder. *She comes—she is here with us.*

“Qariqu, Qatun’Eke Mongoljin,” the others murmured in unison. *Return, Queen Mother.*

“Tengri magtaqu,” Khidyr whispered, staring out across the water, straining her eyes in the gloom of evening for even a glimpse of movement, any hint of the spirit’s presence. *Tengri be praised.*

“Qariqu, Qatun’Eke Mongoljin,” the shamans said over and over in soft, harmonious refrain. Khidyr lifted her voice with them, joining in their implore.

“Qariqu...tusalaqu bide.” *Return...help us.*

There was a soft slap of water, and a woman slowly emerged from the lake. She moved as though walking along the slope of the lakebed beneath the water. At first, only the cap of her pate, ringed with bobbing ripples appeared about twenty feet out from the shore, and then slowly, deliberately, as the woman drew closer, her head rose in full from the water, her shoulders next, and then her torso. She was little more than silhouette and shadow in the dim light, and her long black, sodden hair hung over her shoulders in tangled, wet clumps, clinging to her shoulders and breasts, obscuring nearly all of her face from view.

Khidyr stared at her, her eyes flown wide, her breath trapped in her throat. It was just an illusion, of course. Mongoljin’s spirit emerged from the water; the jegudun’ure

elixir that Khidyr had taken had opened her mind and senses, allowing her to see Mongoljin. The image of this woman, drowned and drawing near was conjured out of Khidyr's mind, nothing more, but she was left breathless with wonder at the sight.

"Tengir magtaqu," she whispered again. *Tengri be praised.*

"Who calls to me?" the woman in the water asked. She stopped, standing in hip-deep water, facing the beach. She was nude, her flesh as pale as new snowfall. Her face was still covered by her hair, but as she spoke, Khidyr heard the pattering of water against water, as if the woman spewed a mouthful of the lake up when she spoke. Her voice was moist and gurgling, little more than a croak.

"I am Khidyr Shriagal, Great Queen Mongoljin," Khidyr said, forcing words from the tightened, strangled confines of her throat. She bowed in prostration, pressing her hands against the mud and lowering her head. She could hear the rustling of clothing as the other shamans behind her adopted similar poses. "I am yeke idugan and servant to your blood kin, Qatun'Eke, Targutai Bokedei, Kagan of Ulus and heir of the mighty Duua, your son."

"Why have you summoned me, Khidyr Shriagal, yeke idugan and servant?" Mongoljin asked, her voice scraping in the cold air like splayed fingertips, hooked and scrabbling for purchase. She stepped forward again. The more she emerged, the clumsier she became, as though ill-accustomed to being outside of the weightless environment of the water. She shambled along, her arms dangling limply at her sides.

"The time of the great prophecy is at hand," Khidyr said, not raising her head from the ground. "Targutai's time has come—the time to restore empire that is rightfully your kin's, Great Mother, has come."

"So long..." Mongoljin said. Khidyr blinked, startled as Mongoljin's foot settled in the mud directly before her face. Khidyr could see her flesh was ashen, nearly translucent; the tips of her toes had a bluish tint to them, the nails crusted with sediment. It was the foot of a woman dead for five thousand years, crawling forth from her watery grave. Khidyr could feel water spilling from her body in thin rivulets, spattering against the cap of Khidyr's head, her neck and shoulders.

This is no illusion, she realized, trembling. No vision brought upon me by the jegudun'ure. This is real—Mongoljin is real. She had never experienced physical

manifestations of spirits like this before, the sensation of water dropping on her, but she knew Mongoljin was more powerful than any spirit she had ever invoked or encountered. Like the man-falcon's endur, Mongoljin was capable of tactile manifestations; as the Oirat's endur had thrown Khidyr's shamans across the room at the palace, so could Mongoljin drip water.

"It has been so long, but always I see," Mongoljin said. "So much has come and passed, and yet I have remained."

"Tusalaqu bide, Qatun'Eke," Khidyr whispered. *Help us.*

"The seeds I planted have yielded bittersweet fruit," Mongoljin said.

"And one flower yet," Khidyr said, lifting her head. Mongoljin stood directly before her, looking down, but Khidyr could not see her face for the shadows and the spilled mess of her sopping hair. "Targutai is the flower, Great Mother. He is the Negh—the one who will restore the dragons to us, and the empire of Duua."

Mongoljin was quiet for a long moment, and then she uttered a strange, snuffling sound. Khidyr blinked as the sound grew louder, into a hoarse, strained sort of caw. Mongoljin was laughing.

"Please, Great Mother," Khidyr said, bewildered and unnerved. "Will you not help us?"

"How would you see me help you, Khidyr Shriagal?" Mongoljin hissed. Her hand moved, flapping clumsily out toward the lake. "Here is my empire. It is one that stands eternal. What need have I for more than this?"

"The empire Duua ruled can belong to your people again, Great Mother," Khidyr said. "It can belong as it always has by right—to Duua's heir."

"Duua..." Mongoljin said softly. "Ulus has always belonged to Duua."

"And to his kin," Khidyr said, nodding. "Dobun's heirs would see it taken from us—taken from you, great Mother Mongoljin. Help us stop them."

Mongoljin hissed, her body convulsing suddenly as she jerked her hands toward her breasts. Khidyr flinched, startled by the violent movement.

"Dobun," Mongoljin said, her voice sodden and garbled, sharp with fury. "He and his bastard tribes hide in the mountains, tucked like rabbits in a clutch while his bitches breed whelps. On and on for millennia, they have spawned them—wind and weather

cannot keep them from it. Hunger and disease cannot stay them.” She spread her fingers into claws and pawed at the air before her face. “How I have watched them—famine, flood, frost, and still they survive.”

“You can keep them from it,” Khidyr said. “You can help us keep them from it.”

“I cannot leave this place,” Mongoljin said. Her hand shot out, her icy, bony fingers hooking against Khidyr’s chin, crushing a soft cry from her. “I cannot leave Tengriss. My spirit is bound here eternal for my crime. Here is my penance, offered every day for the rest of time, my watery crypt—my sunken prison.”

Crime? Khidyr thought, terrified, trembling beneath Mongoljin’s frigid grip. There was no life in Mongoljin’s hand, no warmth, and yet she had the strength of at least ten men within her fingers. *What crime? What penance?*

By Kahl legends, Mongoljin had been the greatest Queen the Ulusians had ever known. She had served as counselor to both her husband, Borjigidal and upon his death, to her son, Duua. She had been a woman of great wisdom and strength; the first to erect great temples and shrines to the dragons, to commission sculptures and paintings recording the treachery of Dobun against Ag’iamon and his people, and the promise of the Negh Ag’iamon had left Duua’s descendents.

“There...is a way...” Khidyr whimpered, wincing as Mongoljin’s fingers tightened against her face. “There is a way you can leave...Great Mother...!”

Mongoljin’s hand left her chin, and Khidyr gasped softly. She drew her fingertips to her face; where Mongoljin’s flesh had touched hers felt cold and numb.

“How?” Mongoljin asked.

“Let me channel your spirit,” Khidyr said. “Come into my form, enter me and you can leave. Lend me your power, your strength.”

“And why do you need it?” Mongoljin asked. “Why now, after so much time as passed, so many long years? Why do you need me?”

“Dobun’s heir is guarded by an unfamiliar spirit,” Khidyr said. “An ayy, Great Mother, with power beyond our abilities.”

Mongoljin laughed again, a harsh, rattling sound. “He is a fledgling endur,” she hissed. “I have sensed him in the water, the wind. So new to death is his form that rot has barely returned him to the soil. He is nothing.”

“Come into my form,” Khidyr pleaded softly. “Help us, great Mother Mongoljin. Help us stop him.”

“You say ‘your form,’ and yet I sense your suni is not your own,” Mongoljin said.

“It is the form of our Qatun’Eke Yisun Goyaljin,” Khidyr said.

“She is Manchu,” Mongoljin said softly, brushing her cold fingertips against Khidyr’s cheek.

“Yes,” Khidyr said. “She is the first-born daughter to the Manchu noyan.”

“As was I,” Mongoljin said. “We were born to be Qatun. Manchu first-borns have always understood that sacrifices must be made to see destiny swayed to our designs. She sent you to me, did she not? She is the reason you have summoned me.”

“Yes,” Khidyr nodded. “Yisun is the one who beseeched me to find you, to beg for your aid. She has gone west, to the Khar mountains in my form, to be with her son as they seek out the dragons’ lair.”

“You performed the ritual of soliqu,” Mongoljin said. “You exchanged your ami for hers.”

“Yes,” Khidyr said, nodding.

“And now you would come to me in takiqu to invoke my spirit,” Mongoljin said. She reached out, placing her clammy, cold palms against Khidyr’s cheeks, cradling Khidyr’s face between her palms. She leaned down toward Khidyr, and Khidyr could see the tip of her nose, her mouth beneath her hair. Her lips were nearly purple in hue, the flesh withered and chapped. No breath expelled from her as she spoke, but water still spurted up from her throat, spewing from her lips, dribbling down her chin. Khidyr could smell her, the stink of submerged decay, of rotted flesh and ancient mildew. Her cheeks were sunken, her gums and teeth beyond her mouth rotten and blackened. “You are either a very powerful idugan, Khidyr Shriagal, or a very desperate one.”

“Will you help us?” Khidyr whispered.

Mongoljin smiled, stroking her hand against Khidyr’s face. “Of course I will help you,” she said. Her hair parted slightly as she moved, and Khidyr could see her eyes glittering beneath the wet tangles. They were black; there were no discernable cornea or irises, only smooth planes of darkness aglow with some sort of simmering, manic

light. She could feel Mongoljin within her mind like a sudden flood of icy water, filling her, and she gasped sharply in horror as she realized

It is a lie...all of it...it has always been a lie...!

Khidyr tried to recoil, but Mongoljin's hands clamped against her tightly, holding her fast.

Mongoljin poisoned Ag'iamon! Khidyr thought. She could see it, her hiimori drawing the terrible truth from Mongoljin, revealing it to her in full. *Tengri save us, that is her crime, why she has been imprisoned here! The dragons' promise has always been meant for the Oirat—for Dobun's heir. Mongoljin lied to the Khahl—it has always been a lie...!*

"No...!" Khidyr whimpered. *Yisun!* she screamed within her mind. *Yisun—turn back! Turn back now! It is—*

Mongoljin lowered her face, shoving her cold, breathless mouth against Khidyr's. *It is for the good of the kingdom,* she whispered within Khidyr's mind, and she writhed, spewing the black, frigid waters of Tengriss from her lips. Khidyr convulsed against her, struggling against her hands, slapping her palms futilely against Mongoljin's arms. Her cries were gargled and strangled as the vomited water rushed down her throat, flooding her gullet, filling her lungs. *And the Khahl.*

Aulus stumbled along the corridor of the palace in Kharhorin. His dog, Caeruleus walked along beside him, awarding him occasional, curious glances that would send him into a fit of helpless laughter. At one point, he laughed himself breathless and he reeled, staggering into the wall. His feet slipped out from beneath him and down he went onto his rump. He leaned his head back against the wall, laughing, and when Caeruleus sniffed him, drawing her wet nose against the angle of his jaw and lapping her the broad blade of her tongue against the side of his face, he shrugged his shoulder to ward her off, snickering.

"Stop now," he said, catching her jowls between his hands and offering them a fond tug. "Let me...let me breathe...you rot damn dog..."

His mind was reeling. In fact, pretty much all of his senses were. The floor beneath him seemed to undulate in slow but deliberate rhythm, and he pressed his

palm against his brow, groaning softly. “Hoah...” he murmured. Caeruleus licked his hand, drawing his gaze, and he giggled.

“Bad dog,” he said, wagging his forefinger at her. He glanced down at himself and blinked in bewildered surprise. He had meant to dress that morning. Surely something as routine and customary as dressing himself had not slipped his mind, but apparently it had. Here it was nightfall, to judge by the lack of sunlight through the windows, and he was wandering the hallways of the palace in a pair of underbreeches and nothing else. He had no shirt on, no stockings or shoes. He had not even bothered to cinch the laced cords of his underbreeches; they lay open and unfettered, the waistband loose about his hips.

“Hoah...” he said, blinking at his dog. “I am a sight, am I not?”

Caeruleus blinked back at him, making him giggle.

It was the serekeum, that peculiar powdered dragon bone and herb mixture Yisun had given him. He had been drawing small piles of it up his nose, inhaling it for almost three days now. Whenever the effects seemed to wane within his body and mind, the concubines had offered more to refresh him. It seemed Aulus was privy to a never-ending supply of the stuff.

“One of the privileges of my post as tribunicia potestate,” he told the dog, and he snorted with laughter.

He did not mind using so much of the serekeum, and the Kahl did not seem to mind giving it to him. Aulus enjoyed the way it made him feel; he could feel it like delicate fingertips brushing against every measure of him, inside and out. He felt infused with light and heat and it made him profoundly, acutely aware of every sound, smell, taste and sight around him. Colors fascinated him, as did the texture of fabrics against his skin. He had dim recollection of spending more than an hour the day before on his knees before one of the concubines, entranced by the brilliant red of her changshan dress, mesmerized by the sensation of silk as he ran his palms against it, following the contours of her hips and torso over and over again. He had never experienced anything so exhilarating in all of his life.

And what is it doing to you? a quiet voice within him whispered.

“It is not hurting me,” Aulus whined in protest to himself. He forked his fingers through his disheveled hair, pushing it back from his face. “Yisun told me the Khahl nobles use it all of the time.”

And you would believe anything that woman told you? The serekeum addled his mind, but it could not fully stifle his reason. This still spoke within his head, a grim and grave voice, like an admonishing parent. *Have you gone bloody mad? Look at yourself, Aulus. Staggering about in a daze, half-dressed and ranting to yourself—to your bloody damn dog!*

“Shut up,” he whispered, covering his face with his hands. “Leave me alone. I want to talk.” For three days now, he had not had occasion to say anything except “please,” “do not stop” or “Mother Above,” and the simple act of speaking, of articulating words and forming complete sentences was luxurious to him. “My ladies are not much for conversation—in fact, I cannot understand a bloody damn word they say in that Ulusian chatter of theirs.” He snickered softly. “Hoah, but they more than make amends for such shortcomings, if I may say. Leave me be. I...I am tired and you are bothersome.”

He snickered again. He had the concubines to thank for his exhaustion, as well as the serekeum. Never in all of his wildest, most vivid or extraordinary fantasies could he have dreamed up such a fate as this. Trapped and snowbound in Ulus with seven of the most exquisitely beautiful women he had ever laid eyes on; women who were completely subservient to his every beckon or bidding, women who knew nothing else in the whole of the Bith except offering him pleasure.

“Heaping, bloody tons of it,” he murmured, laughing again. Caeruleus snuffled as he patted her on the head. “I am surprised I am not walking with a limp. I am surprised I can bloody walk at all.” He glanced at the dog. “I am sorry, Caeruleus, to have kicked you from your spot in the bed. There is scarcely enough room for us all, you understand.”

Caeruleus looked up at him, her floppy ears perked.

“And—no offense offered—my ladies make far more lively company, and they keep me just as warm.”

Do you even remember these past days? his mind scolded. *You would close your eyes with one woman atop you and open them again to find another. How much time lapsed in between them? Do you remember leaving your chamber? Do you remember why you left your chamber?*

“Stop it,” Aulus seethed, shoving the heels of hands against his eyes. “Stop it, stop it, bloody shut up.”

His stomach yowled insistently, loudly enough to attract even the dog’s curious interest. Aulus lowered his hands, glancing down at his lean stomach, and he snickered. “Bugger off, you rot damn yob,” he whispered to the reasonable part of his mind. “Here is why I left my chamber—I am starving to death.”

He had put nothing in his stomach for days except wine and cheese, and he was desperate for some real, hot food. He had stolen away from the company of his concubines and he had ventured out into the palace in search of a slave who might bring him some supper. The corridors were unusually quiet and empty, the palace seemingly desolate and abandoned. Aulus found it peculiar, even in his current, dazed state.

“Hullo?” he called out as he limped to his feet, stumbling clumsily in place. He pressed one hand against the wall to steady himself and used the other to hold his drooping trousers in place about his hips.

The customary appointments of guards and slaves were not the only things missing that evening at the palace. It occurred to Aulus that he had not seen Yisun that day. In fact, he had not seen her since the afternoon in the dragon shrine. Not a day had passed in full since his arrival in Kharhorin when the Qatun’Eke did not pay him some sort of call. Almost three days had come and gone now, without hide, hair or peep from the woman, and Aulus found this vaguely disquieting.

“Where do you suppose she has been?” he asked Caeruleus. “I think she is playing at something, if you ask me. All of this friendliness all at once, and then she is gone. She is playing at something—you mark me at it, Caeruleus.”

He paused in mid-stride, leaning his shoulder against the nearest wall. He closed his eyes and pressed the heel of his hand against his brow again. Even as he had spoken aloud, his words had made a sort of sense to him, and he groaned softly,

wishing he could shake his head fervently and clear the stupefied haze from his mind for a moment. *Something is wrong*, the reasonable part of his mind whispered. *There is a reason for all of this. She is distracting me. I have bloody damn fallen for it—all of this, the visit to the dragon vault, the serekeum, the women, it has all been meant to distract me. But from what?*

He heard a clamor of footsteps from behind him and whirled, nearly spilling onto his rump again in his start. He saw Yisun hurrying along the corridor behind him, surrounded by her circle of shamans. She had no guards with her, which was uncharacteristic and no attendants save for her little witch-folk, and Aulus blinked as she approached, shocked by the Qatun'Eke's appearance.

She looked horrendous. Her hair, always so meticulously sculpted and arranged, hung about her face in disheveled strands, her bundled plaits loosened, her braids unfettered and ratty, slapping against her shoulders. Her clothing was askew and filthy with mud, her outfit and hair damp, as though she had gone for an impromptu swim in a muck-filled pond.

"My...my lady..." Aulus began, shying back against the wall. Caeruleus drew back with him, ducking behind his legs and peering around his hip. The coarse grey hairs of her hackles raised along her shoulders and neck, and she planted her large paws widely. Her lips wrinkled back from her teeth and she growled softly. Aulus blinked at her, startled anew. He had never heard Caeruleus growl before. She might offer a soft woof of inquisitive greeting at visitors to his chamber, but she had always been a remarkably affable dog, given her imposing size.

Yisun and the shamans paid him no mind. They rushed past him as though he were not even there. Yisun did not even spare him a fleeting glance. The shamans scurried in step with her, and Aulus realized they all looked pale and stricken, their eyes wide and anxious, their fingertips plucking nervously against their clothing as they hurried along.

Something has happened, he thought. *Something is wrong.*

"My Lady Yisun...?" he called after her, and Yisun paused. The shamans stumbled to uncertain halts around her, and when she turned, they all drew away from her, moving out of her line of sight.

Yisun stared at him. *Mother Above, what has happened to her?* Aulus thought. She looked like she had drowned. Her face was ashen, the dark-stained sockets of her eyes lending a decidedly ghastly contrast. Her hair clung to her temples and cheeks in dark, sodden tendrils, obscuring her eyes from view. He could hear the soft sounds of water dripping from her hair, her clothes, spattering against the floor.

“My lady, has something happened?” Aulus asked her.

She moved again, her hair drawing away from her eyes and Aulus recoiled.

Mother Above, her...her eyes...! he thought in horror. *What happened to her eyes?*

Yisun’s eyes were black. There was no discerning iris from cornea; what lay between her eyelids was as smooth, black and featureless as stone. It seemed through her gaze alone, he could feel her inside his body, his mind, icy fingertips creeping against and within him. He stared into her black eyes, stricken and helpless; he could not look away from her.

Sweet Mother, she has the eyes of a dead woman!

She turned away without comment and walked again, her stride brisk. The shamans blinked at Aulus with frightened eyes, and then scampered after their mistress, the long hems of their robes whispering against the floor.

The moment Yisun looked away from him, it felt like a rope drawn taut and unyielding between her and Aulus snapped, and he stumbled, feeling his shoulders bump against the wall. He shuddered and as he drew his hands towards his face, letting his breath escape in a long, soft huff, he realized his fingers were trembling uncontrollably.

“What was that?” he whispered, looking at the dog. Caeruleus was still bristled, her yellow eyes fixed down the corridor, following the Qatun’Eke and her shamans. A low growl rumbled from her throat.

I must be seeing things, Aulus thought, brushing his fingertips against his brow. “It is the serekeum. It must be.”

He could think of no other explanation for Yisun’s appearance, her eyes, or the uncomfortable but distinctive impression that she had touched him somehow with her

gaze, her mind, that she had reached inside of him. "It is the serekeum," he said again, trembling.

Then why did the dog see it, too? his reason whispered to him.

"Shut up," Aulus said. The sight of Yisun's eyes, the weight of her unflinching gaze and the peculiar and creepy sensation it had brought to him had taken immediate, unnerving and sobering effect on his mind.

It is the serekeum, he told himself firmly. *I am imagining things. There is nothing wrong with her eyes. I was hallucinating.*

Yisun's appearance might have been his imagination, but her fierce and apparent determination as she had marched down the corridor had not been. She was playing at something, some purpose had been driving her, and with Yisun that could mean nothing good. Aulus turned around and hurried down the corridor for his suite again, his hunger forgotten, his desire for supper abandoned.

He strode across the threshold into his antechamber and found Faustus, his steward sitting before the fireplace, playing some sort of Ulusian card game with one of the concubines. Unlike Aulus, Faustus had apparently taken the time during the past weeks to learn some of the Khahl's culture and language, and as Aulus entered, he heard Faustus say something to the concubine in her native language. Whatever it was, it pleased her enough to make her abandon Khahl protocol and giggle, her hand darting to her face.

The other concubines stood around them, watching them play, and they all turned to Aulus as he tromped across the room.

"My lord...?" Faustus said, rising from his stool. He wore an inquisitive expression on his face that shifted minutely into concern as he realized Aulus' fear, his disquiet. "Are you unwell, Lord Tertius?"

"Send them away, Faustus," Aulus told him, flapping his hand toward the concubines. He did not pause in his stride, marching straight for his chamber. Caeruleus trailed in his wake, sniffing at his heels.

Faustus blinked at him, bewildered. "My lord?"

Aulus stopped at his doorway and turned to look over his shoulder. "I said send them away," he said. "Surely they have their own chamber somewhere in this palace. See that they find it."

Faustus blinked again. "Yes, my lord," he said after a moment's hesitation. He lowered his head in polite deference, and Aulus ducked into his room, letting the door slam behind him.

Aulus paused behind the door of his room, looking in confused dismay at the chamber's state of disarray. Furniture had been shoved against the walls, chairs dragged before the fireplace, with tumbled piles of pillows on the floor and hearth. The bedclothes and coverlets on his large bed had been pulled loose of their moorings, shoved and kicked onto the floor, wadded in piles at the foot of the bare mattress. There were empty glasses and decanters everywhere, some broken against the marble floor, others spilled on cluttered tabletops. He saw colorful scraps of silk knotted about the bedposts, and arms of nearby chairs, and he frowned, trying to remember. The entire room smelled like faded incense and phantom perfume, overlaid with the stink of musk and sweat born of exhausted endeavors.

"What is going on around here?" Aulus groaned, forking his fingers through his hair. He crossed the chamber to his wardrobe, throwing the doors open wide. He grabbed a pair of breeches and pulled them out, hopping clumsily on one foot and then the other as he drew them over his hips. He shrugged his way into a linen shirt, shoving the tails beneath the waistband of his trousers. He decided to forego a cravat at his neck, and drew a justicoat over his shoulders. As he fumbled with the buttons, fastening the coat over his chest, he heard a soft knock at his door and raised his eyes.

"What?"

Faustus poked his head inside. If the mess appalled him as much as it did Aulus, it did not show in the steward's face. "My lord, is all well?" he asked.

"Did you send the women away?" Aulus asked.

"Yes, my lord." Faustus looked genuinely puzzled. He had been in Aulus' service long enough to realize the young man had his share of idiosyncrasies and peculiarities, but this sudden, unexpected transition in his behavior troubled the steward.

“Good,” Aulus said with a nod. He sat down on the floor, pulling a pair of stockings on and buttoning the cuff of his breeches over them. “Faustus, has the Qatun’Eke come to pay me call these past days?”

Faustus looked at him, perplexed. “I...” he began.

“I have not been myself, have I?” Aulus asked. He paused as he shoved his heels into his shoes, and he looked toward Faustus, his eyes round and disconcerted. “Forgive me. I...I do not know what came over me, and I have little memory of this...” He waved his hand toward the ruined chamber. “Of anything. If she came to call, I cannot recall. Have you seen her?”

“No, my lord,” Faustus said. “Not for two days now, nearly three. Not since she gave the ladies to you, my lord.”

Aulus rose to his feet. A wave of vertigo, the last, tempered effects of his most recent snort of serekeum, washed over him, and he stumbled, pressing his hand against his forehead and groaning softly.

“My lord,” Faustus said, worried. He hurried to Aulus’ side, reaching out and laying his hand against the small of Aulus’ back to steady him. “Lord Tertius, you are unwell. Please, why do you not sit down? I will send for some tea, my lord, and supper.”

“No,” Aulus said, shaking his head. “Not yet. There is something I have to do first. Will you come with me, Faustus?”

“Of course, my lord,” Faustus said. “Whatever you would bid of me.”

The two men walked toward the main staircase of the palace, meaning to follow it down to the first floor foyer. Aulus said no more to his steward as he marked a swift pace. He did not tell Faustus about his encounter with Yisun in the corridor, or her bizarre appearance. When they reached the balustrade overlooking the broad marble floor of the foyer two storeys below, Aulus glanced down and froze, his eyes wide.

“Hoah...” he whispered.

“What is it, my lord?” Faustus asked. He peeped over the balustrade.

Yisun and the shamans stood in the foyer, accompanied by ten Minghan guards. They were obviously preparing for a journey of some kind. Yisun had changed out of her sodden clothes and into a heavy, furlined jifu with matching leggings and hat. The shamans and soldiers all wore warm, layered clothing as well, and they all carried

traveling packs strapped to their backs, with bundles blankets atop, or clasped in their hands.

The foyer was expansive and exquisite, with elaborate tile mosaics on the floor depicting a sky filled with dragonriders. The ceiling vaulted three storeys into a broad dome overhead, with glass panels installed to allow sunlight to filter through. The inside of the dome was adorned with hand-painted murals again depicting dragons in flight, and Ulusians astride them.

“That is the Qatun’Eke, my lord, there she is,” Faustus whispered.

“Yes, I know,” Aulus said. He clapped his hand against Faustus’ shoulder and drew him back from the railing. The serekeum still made him wobbly; even watching Faustus lean out over the balustrade was enough to make Aulus’ stomach do a queasy, unhappy somersault. “Do not let them see you, Faustus.”

“Where are they going, my lord?” Faustus asked. Below them, Yisun and her party gathered their belongings and headed for the threshold of the palace, walking outside. Aulus ignored his steward and ducked back along the corridor, stepping into the nearest chamber, a small, vacant parlor.

Aulus stole over to the window and pressed himself against the wall. The Khahl did not use draperies or window hangings. Aulus wanted to peek outside, but did not want to be seen standing before the wide, uncovered window. He leaned over, risking a glance, and saw Yisun and her companions saddling a group of bergelmirs that had been brought from the royal stables to the grand, terraced entrance of the palace. There were more Minghan outside to assist in their efforts, the loading of food and water, and Aulus saw Yisun turn her head, speaking to her guards.

“She has told you of no trip, my lord?” Faustus asked quietly, peering around Aulus’ shoulder and gleaning a look below.

“No,” Aulus said, frowning. His breath frosted the glass in a soft haze. “She has not.”

“Shall I send for legionnaires, my lord?” Faustus asked. “Dispatch them to the grounds and see her stopped?”

“No,” Aulus said softly, shaking his head.

“Would you have her followed, Lord Tertius?”

“No,” Aulus said. “There is no need, Faustus.” He glanced at his steward. “I know where she is going.”

“My lord?” Faustus asked, bewildered and surprised.

“She is going west,” Aulus murmured as he gazed out the window again. “Only so far as the Chagan Sea. By that I would presume the Forks of Sube. She is going to join her son, and two hundred of her Minghan soldiers.”

“The Qatun would join the Kagan on his hunt?” Faustus asked, baffled.

“They are hunting for something, alright.” Aulus realized now. *How could I have been so bloody stupid?* he thought, and he snickered. “She is mad. They are all bloody mad.”

“My lord?”

Aulus watched Yisun hook her boot in her stirrup, swinging herself gracefully, easily into her saddle. She took her reins in hand, snapping something in sharp imperative to her guards, and the bergelmir pranced in place beneath her, pawing at the ground.

“The Khar mountains lie west, where the Chagan Sea meets the empire,” Aulus murmured. He laughed again. “I will be damned. They are hunting for dragons.”

Faustus blinked at him. “Dragons, my lord?”

Aulus nodded. “It is a stupid tale,” he said. “Though the dragons were real once—Yisun has the remains of two of them locked up beneath her little shrine in the east garden.” Faustus blinked at him again and Aulus spared him a glance. “I have seen them myself. She showed them to me three days ago. There are paintings on the walls inside—a little story played out about how the dragons went away, but will come back one day when some chosen son, a rightful heir comes. Something like that.” He shook his head. “It is bloody damn nonsense is what it is. There were dragons once, but they are gone now—long gone.”

“The Qatun does not believe so?” Faustus said quietly, looking out the window again.

“Apparently not,” Aulus remarked. “I think she believes Targutai is this chosen son, the rightful heir. She has sent him off into the Khar—she is going to join him—because she wants to use the dragons against the empire. She thinks Targutai

will lead Ulus against the empire, that he can find the dragons.” He snorted. “Never mind that bloody little bastard could not find his scrawny ass with both hands, a map, candle and two weeks to try.”

“You will not stop her, my lord?”

“Stop her?” Aulus turned to Faustus and laughed. “Are you daft? She is doing me a bloody favor—the whole of the empire a great service! Let them wander out among the mountains. They will get lost and they will all die chasing legends—the whole damn bloody lot of them. I might finally get some work done about here.” He turned and looked out the window, watching the bergelmirs begin to leave, tromping slowly through the deep snow in a line for the palace gates.

“Shall we notify the empire, then?” Faustus asked. “I can arrange at once for a courier falcon, my lord, to send word to Cneas, that they might—”

“The empire,” Aulus scoffed, and he laughed again, startling Faustus into silence. “Cneas does not care for what happens here, so long as the borders to Engjold stay open and under their sway. What other interest or concern do they have for Ulus? None.”

“Lord Tertius,” Faustus said quietly. “If the Qatun’Eke means to revolt, to lead her people against the empire, then Cneas would certainly be concerned about it.”

“There will be no revolt, Faustus, with nothing but legends—ancient, half-forgotten lore to guide Yisun,” Aulus said. “She is mad—they are all bloody mad, and they are traipsing off to their deaths. Let them—that alone will seem to serve the empire’s interests and advantage...and all the while it will serve mine, as well.”

“My lord?”

Aulus smiled, watching Yisun leave. *You thought you could distract me*, he thought. *Fool me, deceive me, ploy me with your so-called gestures of goodwill, your little medicines, your well-trained whores.*

“My position here as tribunicia potestate has placed me in a most unique position, Faustus,” Aulus said. “One I had not fully realized until three days ago, or come to appreciate until just this very moment.” His smile broadened. “It is a position that can bring great benefits to me, if I allow it... plenty that are mine alone, and bring no harm to the empire.”

You think you are smarter than me, Yisun. More patient, but you are wrong. Go and find your dragons, you daft, crazed bitch. Take your soldiers and your half-wit son into the mountains and die there. I will gladly mind the realm in your stead.

“Who needs Cneas?” he murmured. “When I can enjoy an empire of my own?”

Yisun—turn back! Turn back now! It is—

Yisun jerked in her seat along the stern of the Uru’ut knarr, her eyes flying wide, her breath caught beneath the bosom of Khidyr’s form as she heard the idugan scream suddenly, shrilly within her mind.

Khidyr? she thought, her body seized with a sudden chill. Khidyr’s voice had been filled with terror, so poignant and unexpected that the dark, downy hairs along Yisun’s forearms, the nape of her neck had stirred beneath the warmth of her coat at the sound. Yisun looked all around, as if she expected to see Khidyr somewhere, along the nearby coast of Ulus or upon the water. *Khidyr, what is it? What has happened? Answer me!*

Khidyr’s voice had cut off in mid-cry, as though a hand had clapped firmly, sharply against her mind’s mouth, stifling her. She did not call to Yisun again, and all at once, Yisun realized to her dismay that she could no longer sense Khidyr; she could not feel the woman’s presence within her mind.

Khidyr? Answer me!

Night had fallen upon Qoyina Bay. The moon was hidden from view beneath a blanket of thick clouds; light snowfall peppered down, and the wind off of the water was frigid and bitter. Yisun had felt Khidyr within her all day, although the idugan had little occasion or time to speak much with Yisun. She was busy with a ceremonial ritual called takiqu. She had found an ayy spirit to invoke, one she had felt might possess enough strength to counter the spirit guardian of the Oirat’s man-falcon.

Mongoljin, Khidyr had told her. *Borjigidal’s Qatun’Eke—Duaa’s Great Mother. She drowned in Tengriss Lake and it is said her spirit remains within its dark waters.*

Of course, Yisun had thought, and she had smiled slightly. *Mongoljin will help us—how could she not? Targutai is her blood kin—she was a first-born Manchu daughter, like me. Our bloodlines are fiercely fettered and intertwined. She knows of the*

legends, of Ag'iamon's promise. She is the first to have recorded them. How could she not help us now to see them through?

The ritual to invoke Mongoljin's spirit was apparently lengthy and complicated. Yisun did not understand such things; she had no need for the knowledge of her shamans' ceremonies and incantations. That was why she had shamans—to bother with such things. All she cared about was that Khidyr succeeded and soon. The Uru'ut had only the briefest of leads on them, no more than hours. The Khahl kept their longboats a safe distance, and out of view of the Oirat knarrs, and so far, the Uru'ut had stopped for nothing. They steered a deliberate and purposeful course and did not run ashore to camp for the night. They meant to travel the night through, obviously intending to meet Aigiarn by morning.

We cannot risk following them into the mountains without Mongoljin's ayy to protect us, Yisun had thought earlier in the evening, when her impatience had at last overwhelmed her. What are you doing, Khidyr? Why will she not answer you? We do not dare follow the Oirat without her—not with that ayy spirit the man-falcon commands!

I am trying, Yisun, Khidyr had thought, sounding weary. We have made countless offerings. I do not know why she does not answer. Perhaps her spirit is sleeping.

Then wake her up! Yisun had cried. Do such notions take a genius to concoct them, Khidyr? What is the matter with you? If she is sleeping—wake her up!

Khidyr had fallen silent and sullen after this. Yisun was aware of her presence, but Khidyr did not speak to her again, not for several long hours, and then she had shrieked in Yisun's mind, her voice panic-stricken and terrified.

Yisun—turn back! Turn back now! It is—

It is what? Yisun asked. What do you mean, turn back now? What has happened? Khidyr—speak to me! What has happened?

Your idugan has guided you as far as she is able, Manchu daughter, said a voice within Yisun's mind. Yisun froze on the bench, her body stiffening, her eyes widening. It was not Khidyr who spoke to her; it was a woman's voice, soft, low and unfamiliar to Yisun. She could feel this woman inside of her, sense her presence in place of Khidyr's, like a sudden, icy chill within and without.

Who are you? Yisun asked. She had never communed with spirits before. She did not possess hiimori, and had left the invoking and beseeching of spirits to Khidyr's trained powers. The rapport with Khidyr had been something new and foreign to her, exciting in many ways, but this new voice, this strange, sudden presence frightened her and she trembled.

You know who I am, Manchu daughter, said the voice.

"Mongoljin," Yisun whispered. Megetu and Targutai sat together on the bench before her. Targutai was distracted by his own aggravation at their slow, cautious pace, and paid his mother no mind as he scowled, his eyes trained upon the shoreline. Megetu heard her soft voice and he turned, glancing at Yisun over his shoulder. He knew what Khidyr had spent the day attempting; Yisun had told him of Khidyr's intentions, and he raised his brow at Yisun in curious inquiry.

You have a lovely form, Yisun Goyaljin, first-born daughter. Mongoljin's words were like an icy breeze whispering inside of Yisun's head, making her shudder. *I shall take good care of it for you in your absence.*

Yisun felt her throat grow taut and constricted. *Where is Khidyr?*

Khidyr is gone. Her usefulness to you has waned.

What have you done with her? Yisun asked.

She heard Mongoljin laugh softly within her mind. *I have done nothing to her. She had every opportunity to defend herself. I told her to perform the soliqu—to trade her ami for yours—and then to attempt takiqu, the invoking of an ayy required either a very strong, or very desperate shaman. She proved to be the latter.*

"Khidyr..." Yisun whispered, tears springing to her eyes, her hand darting to her mouth.

Do not worry for it, daughter, Mongoljin purred. *Your ami is safe, as is your form. Khidyr's ami has not left for the great spirit tree. It has merely been banished into qarang'qui, the unknown darkness—neither death nor life, but something suspended and unending between them. That is what happens, daughter, when you invoke a spirit stronger than yourself. It is the way of the Tegsh—the only way.*

Megetu looked at Yisun, his brows lifted in concern for her tears. She shook her head at him, her brows furrowed and turned her body toward the starboard bulwark, fixing her gaze on the land as tears rolled down her cheeks.

It is for the good of the kingdom, Mongoljin said. And the Khahl.

Yisun pressed her lips together, struggling to contain her tears. The cleft between her brows deepened.

Would you rather keep a lover, Yisun? Mongoljin asked. Or ally yourself with an a gazriin ezen who can defeat the man-falcon's endur and see your Targutai—our Targutai—to his destiny? You are no fool. You are a Qatun—by your Manchu birthright, and by blood. Would you sacrifice five thousand years for the paltry, fleeting pleasures of a lover's touch? Or would you see your son—your people—know triumph?

Yisun drew her hands—Khidyr's hands—to her face and brushed her tears away against her fingertips. She felt breathless and stunned; a portion of her heart had shattered. But another part of her, deep within her mind had whispered in tandem with Mongoljin, her own mantra finding harmony with Mongoljin's words.

It is for the good of the kingdom, and the Khahl.

Khidyr was gone. There would be no bringing her back, no begging or pleading with Mongoljin for her return. Yisun understood what the qarang'qui meant, just as she understood that Mongoljin was right. If Khidyr had not been strong enough to control Mongoljin's spirit, then to keep the spiritual balance within her, she had to be vanquished, banished. And though this horrifying thought speared her heart, hurt her beyond any measure, Yisun also knew that Mongoljin was right. She was no fool. She had made sacrifices her entire life through to see her son to this moment, never mind the losses and efforts of countless others, including Mongoljin herself, who had come before her. Yisun had lied, deceived, manipulated, even murdered to see Targutai reach his destiny and claim his birthright as the Negh. Khidyr's loss broke her, but it had also proven necessary, for she had summoned Mongoljin from the depths of Tengriss in the process.

Will you help us? Yisun asked Mongoljin.

Of course, daughter.

The Oirat have an ayy of their own to guard them, Yisun said. He is powerful. Dangerous.

He is nothing, Mongoljin said. I will dissipate his spirit like dust in a windstorm.

Yisun lowered her head, closing her eyes. "Tengri magtaqu," she breathed.

Tengri be praised.

I am sorry for your pain, daughter, Mongoljin told her gently, drawing her gaze from her lap.

It is unimportant and fleeting, Yisun replied, her tears waning, drying in the cold wind against her cheeks. It will pass.

We have each and all made sacrifices, endured pain that destiny might be served in our favor, Mongoljin said. That is your birth-right as a Qatun, and a Manchu daughter.

Yes, Yisun said, nodding once. *It is for the good of the kingdom, and the Kahl.*

The adventure continues...

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

Temu felt it when Yeb's ami was taken into the qarang'qui. The gentle thrumming of his soul, the vibration of his spirit's gerel fire within Temu's mind suddenly fell still. His voice ripped to an abrupt, shrill halt, and Temu uttered a hiccupping, anguished sob. "Yeb...!" he pleaded, falling onto his knees. "Oh...oh, no, please...Yeb...!"

He turned around, hooking his hands against Rhyden's shoulder, shaking the Elf. "Rhyden!" he pleaded. "Rhyden, help me!" He folded himself over Rhyden's body, huddled against him in terror, tucking his face against the nook of the Elf's shoulder. "Rhyden, please!" he wept, clutching at Rhyden's blankets, his clothing, shuddering against him. "Please, Rhyden—please, you have hiimori! Please hear me! Help me! Please wake up! Please...I...I am frightened! Help me!"

He heard Mongoljin laughing softly, and he turned, moaning as she walked slowly toward him again. He shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. "No...please...please do not..."

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

I drew a ring around our campsite, Yeb had told him, and Temu moaned again in horrified realization. *It is a jaqa, as a spiritual barrier, to keep our uthas within—yours,*

mine and Rhyden's—and keep any spirits or spells the Khahl send to spy upon us from drawing near.

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

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

I am trapped here! I cannot cross the jaqa—I cannot get away!

Mongoljin laughed softly, chuckling to herself. “Where will you go? Your yeke shaman has bound and abandoned you here within this circle, little heir. You are not strong enough to pass the jaqa, like your Yeb Oyugundei, or me. What will you do, whelp? Where will you go?”

Temu turned, stumbling until he felt his shoulders strike the unyielding boundary of the jaqa. He trembled, hiccupping for breath as he watched her approach. “Father,” he pleaded, drawing his hands to his heart, clutching at Yesugei’s ongon. “Father, please help me!”

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

“Father!” Temu cowered against the jaqa. “Father, please! Where are you? Please...please...!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

About the Author:

Sara Reinke lives in Kentucky with her husband and son. She is the author of *Book of Days*, the award-winning first volume in the Chronicles of Tiralainn series, *Book of Thieves* and *Book of Dragons*. To find out more about Sara, or to read excerpts from these and other available or upcoming titles, visit online at www.sarareinke.com.



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