

## Summer Thunder - by Sherwood Smith

### I. Of a Challenge

I shall begin with the words Countess Darva of Oleff wrote as a very old woman:

*This was the year that Queen Hatahra surprised us, at her advanced age, by birthing an heir whose first wailing breath demoted the queen's sister, the Princess Lasthavais, from heir apparent to surplus princess, to be married to a suitable king. Colend's peace and prosperity for hundreds of years has depended not on acts of war, but on judicious marriage-treaties.*

*Princess Lasthavais was then twenty-five. When we left at the beginning of summer to the yearly music festival in Sartor, we knew our return would bring every suitor from every kingdom in the east. Lasva's beauty was not exaggerated; if anything, the portraits never caught the exact shade of her summer sky eyes, or the sweet but pensive shadows at the corners of her exquisite mouth, a mouth that had seldom smiled over the summer, alas, alas.*

*So you see the picture, my dears? We are at a posting house midway between Sartor and Colend, built of decorative stone, located just above Great River Fork in Jhamond, and there along the low roof are all our shields, including that of Princess Lasthavais.*

*Then rides up in military formation a group of young men, most of them with braided hair the color of sunflowers, wearing plain coats of servant gray that were not cut like anything our servants wear: made tight to their arms and chests down to their waists, high at the neck, the skirts long to the tops of their high blackweave boots. And riding at the front, all dressed in black except for the golden buckle to his belt, their leader, who stops his horse--and you would never believe the horses, my dears--and just raises his hand, and one of those boys throws a javelin to strike down into the ground before the inn door. Attached to that javelin is a peculiar pennon, all black, with a fox face on it, a strange sort of fox that almost looks like a hunting bird.*

*And I knew the moment that javelin struck the ground that everything in our lives was going to change.*

Hindsight, of course, is always accurate in prediction.

Otherwise Countess did not lie--she really was there, and really did see Prince Ivandred's personal runner throw down the javelin bearing the Montredaun-An fox pennon, which belonged to the heir to the throne of Marloven Hesea.

This prince was a slender fellow of medium height, dressed in severe black, belted at his narrow waist a long knife with a gold-topped black handle. His pale hair was neatly braided and looped back. His face was square, strong bones, eyes of light blue, his manner extraordinarily still; he drew the eye despite the more flamboyantly dressed cousin Macayal of Enaeran at his side, tall, also blond, easy of manner, and laughing.

A short time later Ivandred stood in the center of a spacious chamber, the walls hung in pale green watered silk, the quilt matching, and faced this same cousin. "I don't know about that bed. Looks like a whole lot of pillows. Stifling."

"Then sleep on the carpet," Macayal said. "No one will know, unless you invite someone in. But you'd better get rid of the day's horse sweat and dress for the musical concert, unless you want to lose our little wager by offending the princess's pretty little nose."

Ivandred tossed down his riding gloves. "You really want to go through with this wager?"

Macayal laughed. "Trepidation? You?"

Ivandred shrugged. "If this princess is half as beautiful as rumor promises, she won't give either of us a look. You said, here in the east your Enaeran is considered remote from their fashions. I can see it is true. Then to their eyes Marloven Hesea is a barrack."

"A huge one," Macayal observed, amused. "Biggest one on the continent."

Ivandred opened a hand.

Macayal laughed, masking no reference to his real motive.

Ivandred's sister Tharais had taken Macayal aside the day they reached Remalna after their long journey east, he and Ivandred having ridden to escort her to her wedding in Remalna. She'd murmured, *He will never tell you how bad things are at home. Will you keep him busy here in the east, as long as you can?*

Macayal thought of his uncle, the king of Marloven Hesea: bitter, violent, and dangerous. Macayal wanted to keep his word to his cousin Thar, whom he loved like a sister, but how?

Until they heard talk at Remalna's court of the beautiful princess Lasthavais, supposedly as handsome as her infamous ancestor, Emperor Matthias, who had used the wits, charm, and astonishing good looks he'd inherited from his equally famous mother, Lasthavais Dei, to conquer half a continent. It had been an impulse that led him to suggest not returning

to the west but riding farther east, making a wager on which of them would win a kiss from this famous princess.

It still surprised him that Ivandred had accepted.

He said now, "Whether we get a glimpse of her or not, it's good practice for you Marlovens--one day you may even be civilized. So begin. Dress!"

Chuckling softly, he left in search of the baths.

Dress just for musical concerts. Ivandred reflected on that as his cousin shut the door. Once a year they dressed in formal House tunics at home, not for music but for the drumming. On New Year Week's Firstday, when he had to stand behind his father on his throne and listen to the jarls renew their vows, then they went outside, whatever the weather, and watched the academy cadets perform contests of skill.

Dressing seemed to be a requirement for this new sort of encounter, not a hunt for brigands or lawbreakers, or a clash against rebelling jarls, but to engage a woman's kiss. And the weapons appeared to be clothing, manners, and words.

He had no objection to trying something new; it was better than remembering the trouble he'd left behind at home. Not just violence--he was accustomed to that--but a blade through the heart from the one he loved, who refused him and walked away.

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## II. Of Sketches

Lasva stood in her room looking down at her fans. How odd, she thought, seeing them for a moment as alien objects. *I think about which I shall choose, and what message that sends, and I use it to say things I cannot voice.* Some things you couldn't even say with a fan, such as how angry she'd become with Ananda's obsession with the news from the duchy of Alarcansa. *Did she, too, love Vasya?* Lasva traced fingers up and down each fan, then back again. *If so, we share our grief.*

Ananda might have loved in her own way. Lasva knew only that last winter word promised he was coming back to court after years away. That after relentless pursuit Ananda had gotten Vasalya Lassiter's attentions for a winter's weekend at the Altan snow house, after which she'd sent triumphant messages to all the other court ladies; but in spring Vasalya came, alone, to court. And the first person he danced with was Lasva.

She pressed her hands to her throat, wincing at the pain that never seemed to end.

Now Ananda seemed unable to resist making jests every single day of this dreary long journey, as if she could assuage her own feelings by getting everyone to laugh at the triumphant Duchess of Alarcansa who'd bought her newly-wedded Duke.

But the truth was inescapable: Vasalya was now a duke, married to Carola Definaen of Alarcansa, with his hair tied back in the white ribbon of the devoted married man.

When Lasva saw him next, he must be the most distant of acquaintances. Resolution came with another surge of anguish. She picked up a fan and walked out, trying to put physical distance between her and memories.

But it had not worked when she left for Sartor--and it did not work now.

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"The concert rooms are that way," Macayal said to Ivandred as they walked downstairs. He pointed with his thumb in one direction, along a carpeted hallway with polished wooden paneling.

"Concerts," Ivandred repeated. "Since we won't see our princess for the crowds--is she even here?--why don't we just leave and camp with my riders?"

Macayal shook his head. "We stay here, like proper princes, and practice our Kifelian. We need it," he added.

Ivandred could not argue with that. He'd discovered on the month-long ride north and east that Kifelian, the language of the Colendi people, was deceptively easy to learn, for it was related to the Sartoran that all educated persons were taught along with their home tongue, but the way people spoke it was quick, curiously drifting, with convoluted tenses whose meaning was difficult to grasp without reflection. In addition to that these courtiers seemed to sing, almost, the way their voices rose, fell, paused with drawn-out vowels that sometimes changed notes.

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Lasva took in the music room at a glance. She returned bows and curtseys from the clusters of people, her fan held open at the neutral Anticipation of Artistic Pleasure, giving a smile and polite word here and there, aware of conversations resuming as she made her quiet way across the room to the table by the fire.

The focus of the company gathered there was two young lords, one entirely in rose, the other wearing layers of celestial blue alternated with pale gold. If he dared that color to catch Lasva's attention, he was disappointed, so they resumed idly vying with one another in teasing an enchanted young woman named Lissais, and a very bored Ananda, who watched the others in the room over her fan.

Here also was young Farava, new to Colend's court under her mother's wary eye, very correct but stiff and uncomfortable. And alone.

"May I see your album?" Lasva asked, sitting on a satin couch next to her.

Farava blushed, smiled, and held it out; Farava's mother, the Countess, cast Lasva a grateful look. Lasva leafed through the pages, glancing at the variety of sketches of Farava, ranging widely in skill, and came to a page marked with a thin golden ribbon. There was a fast but well-executed sketch not just of tall, thin Farava, capturing the exact expression of her merry brown eyes, but in the background Lasva discovered herself, standing pensively framed in a window, the complicated folds of her five layers of over robes indicated by no more than blurred silver-point lines.

Not a window. A mirror, and she wore a lace mask.

"Isn't that a wonderful drawing?" Farava whispered. "He said I am as beautiful as a princess, which is why he sketched me with you. I hope you don't mind," she added quickly, blushing.

Sketches of masks and mirrors conveyed their own hidden meaning. The drawing was not signed, except by a quick semblance of a coronet: the younger Landis prince.

*Marry me*, he'd said to Lasva, laughing. *We are so alike*.

Perhaps they were, in mirrored rooms, surrounded by masked courtiers, but not in the realm of the spirit, or he would have seen that her acknowledging the truth of his remark did not admit of it being a compliment.

*If I have to marry, it will not be to a mask*, she thought. "How could I mind being included in something so charming?" Lasva murmured.

Ananda spoke. She began to turn the young lords' banter into a joke about ribbons and Alarcansa, but her mother, the Duchess of Gaszin, summoned Ananda with one swift glance, and the subject was left in her rustling, sulky wake.

Lasva set aside the album, wishing suddenly she was back on the river, watching the moon ripple in liquid light over the dark waters.

Countess Darva of Oleff--she who would write of this day for her descendants--watched the trailing folds of Ananda's gown and contemplated the lingering poison of Carola Definaen's presence. She thought back to when the lovely young heir to one of the most powerful duchies in the land had arrived at court, the same age as the princess, and one would have thought, a ready-made friend. Her pale blond beauty even complemented Lasva's vivid coloring, her curling dark hair with its faint gold highlights.

But though the princess had offered friendship, Carola wanted Lasva's friends, Lasva's position as fashion's leader, and finally, this spring, she fixed her cool, considering gaze on the rakish Vasalya Lassiter, debt-ridden, reckless, gambler, notoriously unreliable--who had begun matching wits with Lasva, never alone, always across the ballroom or the riding field, filling the watchers with the simmering anticipation nicknamed by courtiers (via a new shade of pale gold used in ribbons and fans and formal over-robés) *summer thunder*.

Then came the birth of the royal heir. Darva remembered the smiles hidden behind fans, the whispers rustling through court: now there was no chance the Lassiter family could count on rescuing their desperate affairs by their wayward heir being ribbon-tied as consort to a future queen.

And Carola had exerted all her wealth and power to one end: marriage.

Darva ran her fingers along the silken stitching on her fan, trying not to remember the cold triumph tilting in Carola's round face, her small bow of a mouth, when she announced the approaching wedding.

The Countess sighed and glanced up, to find Lasva's gaze on her, concerned, kind. Lasva, despite being leader of fashion, and a princess, and the inheritor of the Dei family's astonishing good looks and charm, had never flirted with anyone's lover, never intrigued with white-ribboned married men, never even gossiped, and yet Carola's one goal in life was to possess what Lasva loved the most. Why?

"Ah," came the slow drawl of the Duchess of Gaszin. "Here are the musicians."

Lasva glanced idly, wearily, past the row of soberly dressed people carrying their musical instruments; her gaze drifted to the little stir just inside the doorway, and her weariness gave way to mild interest. People parted, their attention all turned one way--but not toward the musicians. They deferred before a young man all in black, who stood alone, outlined by light, in the doorway.

The sudden impact of eyes meeting eyes smote Lasva with the blinding fire of a lightning strike.

But it was not lightning, for there was no thunder, or rain, or burn; the shock was entirely inside her skull, leaving her staring witlessly at a pair of pale blue eyes the exact shade of Skya Lake's deep-winter ice.

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### III. Of Horses in Flight

Ivandred and Macayal followed six musicians into the music room, and the crowd stirred, attention shifting from the promise of entertainment to the outlandishly dressed newcomers. Ivandred scanned the room, looking for the remarkable Dei features that sometimes appeared in the scattered descendants of that family, and there she was.

The first impression was of blue and silver and complementing shades of brown. Then he saw a perfect oval face, skin of a warm brown with dusky rose underneath, framed by curling dark hair, winged dark brows, and long lashes lifting to show the lights as pinpoints in eyes of the blue of a summer sky. Below that an artful draping of shimmering folded moth-web silver over a body of graceful curves.

She gazed, unwinking, straight into his eyes.

Sound and sense vanished, leaving only the drum of his heart against his ribs.

"Come along," Macayal murmured. "We're direct in the doorway."

Ivandred looked around, saw people waiting for him to move from the doorway, which he blocked.

He shifted to one side. The crowd followed the musicians within, and the latter took up a station opposite the fireplace, and struck up a lively melody. More people entered, drawn

by the music, until the room became quite crowded.

Ivandred elbowed Macayal and jerked his head toward the door.

Outside the air was much cooler, the sound only some night birds, and the rush of the river downslope from the back of the inn.

"Don't you want to stay and talk to her?" Macayal asked. In the reflected light from the long row of windows he looked interested, even amused, but not the least stricken by desire.

"Hear her talk first," Ivandred said. He shook his head, drawing in a slow, soundless, but deep breath.

"For once rumor was, if anything, stingy," Macayal offered, thinking about how strange these things were: here he was, a practiced flirt, but he had not managed to garner more than a distracted glance from the princess--nor, despite her face and form transcending rumor--did he find he wanted to pursue her. Appreciation, yes. Desire, only in the aesthetic sense.

Ivandred, who had obviously shared that thunderbolt of instant attraction--so very, very rare did it ever go equally both ways!--did not answer.

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The first time Ivandred saw her, she was seated there on the white satin couch.

The second time occurred two days later, when a sudden storm out of the west made everyone on the road take shelter in a guard post lying atop a little ridge.

They didn't get a chance to speak that time, either, not with sopping aristocratic travelers roaming around the hastily-swept garrison, bemoaning the storm.

By then she had found out who he was, though neither name nor kingdom meant much beyond a vaguely remembered reputation for warfare. Not that any of that mattered. What did matter was that she knew when he entered the big mess hall even though her back was to the door; that she could feel his gaze on her because her entire body seemed to be lit like a candle. She knew it was attraction, as ephemeral--and as trustworthy--as a butterfly in a wind. But it had never happened before, ever, with a mere glance. Vasalya had made her feel that way when he took her hands to dance with her, when he bent to



whisper a shared joke and then kissed her softly behind her ear. This Prince Ivandred could set fire to her bones just by looking at her across a room.

What would happen when they spoke, would there be the meeting of minds she had come to cherish with Vasalya?

She kept her back turned, feeling quite as young and callow as Farava.

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"The Remalnans were right," Macayal said two days later. "These Colendi are strange."

They had just begun riding, the morning breeze was cool, bearing a hint of winter, the sun passing from warmth to shadow behind big, white fluffy clouds.

"How do you find them strange?"

"Did you do treasure hunts for your Name Day celebrations?"

"No." Ivandred did not explain that his Name Day had never been celebrated, probably because on the day his father came of age he had killed Ivandred's grandfather. "Give me a scout report, not a guessing game."

"Well, it's going to take some hard riding if we want to talk to that princess. She's surrounded by courtiers, and they all want her attention. And the road is filling up, d'you see?"

Ivandred grinned. "I've noticed."

"It's just going to get worse when we reach Colend. Converge with suitors from the north and south. All of 'em wearing their latest fashions, talking about their latest poems and plays, waving those fans around. We don't know any of their inside rules. If we can't get close to her now, it's going to be impossible when we reach their capital."

Macayal paused. To him, Ivandred looked remote; he couldn't know that the Marlovan heir didn't see the road curving eastward, with its steady procession of beautiful coaches followed by a train of baggage carts and servants in gigs, or the slow stream crossing under a little bridge, the cows in the field to the left, a town far to the south. He saw

Lasthavais's dense blue gaze, and even in memory its impact had not lost strength.

"I will ride to Colend, but not jostling with them," Ivandred said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at two men seated in an open carriage behind, drawn by four horses in harness, several other men on horseback keeping them company.

He shook his head. Carriages that wasted four good animals made as little sense as the idea of wearing a rapier in places like inns and withdrawing rooms. Didn't matter that he'd been told it was old custom for escorts to go armed. In his view that wasn't armed, and you didn't fight in drawing rooms. These courtiers dressed different, thought different, spoke in a different language that had only a little to do with translating words.

"So what's your plan?" Macayal asked.

"Ride another route. Horses need a decent run. They've been walking and breathing dust off these roads long enough. Go ask permission to court her. When she gets to Alsais, either she meets me, or if she won't, we'll go home. You riding with me?"

Macayal shrugged. "Too lazy. I'll ride with them, have a try at the princess with my winning ways. And even if she doesn't give me a look like the one she gave you, there are plenty of others to flirt with. More fun than hard riding."

Ivandred nodded once. Then he lifted his hand in the longed-for gesture to his riding captain, who blew a fast triple-chord fanfare on a horn.

"Yip yip yip!" the Marlovans cried, and kneed their horses.

From the open chariot behind them, it seemed one moment the mysterious Marlovens were riding sedately in that compellingly strict formation, the next they crossed country with the speed of a raptor, the horses seeming not just to run through the fallow field, but to soar.

The Desentis heir, a tall, strapping fellow, said admiringly, "Look at 'em ride!"

Ananda's older brother, the Gaszin heir, frowned as he raised his hand against the morning sun. He tracked that straight black figure with the pale hair riding the lead horse. His friends all turned his way, expecting him to make some observation, but he just shook his head. He hadn't made it to age thirty in the court most known for words being used as weapons without learning that opinions were best locked behind your teeth.

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Later that evening, Lasva sat in an inn withdrawing room that seemed indistinguishable from all the others she'd seen on this long journey. Music, albums, who in Sartor had drawn in whose, and how much--the chatter made her head ache. She sat next to the fire, staring down into blue and red and gold snapping flames.

And here came Ananda's voice, tremulous with false laughter, which tightened the net of tension bound round Lasva's skull. She longed for solitude. Her emotions tumbled through her mind like, well, summer thunder. First the lightning-strike of disappointment when she heard that the Marlovens had left the road. Now Ananda's refined torture. She hadn't thought about Vasalya while she tried to find a way to speak to that Marloven prince without all the ears of court surrounding her. But now that he was gone, the old pain clawed at her heart.

Chatter, chatter, endless chatter--

Ching!

The tiny, silvery note was entirely internal, and unexpected.

Lasva raised her fan with one hand, then slid her other hand to her inner pocket buried in the many soft folds of her filmy gown. She had promised her sister years ago to always carry her magical notebbox, though they'd used it maybe twice in the four years Lasva had been going down to Sartor for the music festival.

She closed her hand around it, and surveyed her company. Not here, not now.

Once she was alone, she opened the box and took out the note. It was written in her royal sister's square hand:

*Give out that you will arrive on the Thirdday after next week. If necessary, pretend to be ill, so your carriage can be closed. Be prepared to transfer by magic; the wards will be prepared to pass you through. Chwahir have been seen massing in the mountain passes to the east.*

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#### IV. Of the Comforts of Ignorance

"... and I'm afraid all our quiet is going to end soon," Tarsa, the new maid in Colend's royal residence, said with a sigh.

Kivic, newly hired in the stables, poured out more hot mulled wine, with expert practice keeping his face bland.

By now they had a comfortable little fiction going, all of her own making, for he knew that she had sworn on being hired not to dally with anyone. Oh, but he had assured her during the delicate days of pique, smile, provocative comment, that this was no *dalliance*. He knew the vow was to keep gossip about the royal family from spreading outward from the palace and into the world.

So he did not say, "The princess? Returning?"

No, to answer such direct questions would be *telling*.

He said, "I suppose we'll all find ourselves hip deep in extra work soon, and just when the weather is starting to nip at the fingers and toes."

Extra work. Tarsa's lip curled. She was so easy to suggest ideas to. You picked the ones both selfish and lonely--that was the first step in finding information.

"I haven't heard anything but rumors," he went on, sipping his wine and sighing. "I don't suppose you haven't a hint of when we start bracing up against all that extra demand."

Second rule: create a sense of 'us' against 'them'. Us being Kivic and whoever he wanted information from, and 'them' being those he wanted information about. We are the heroes, they are the enemies.

"Oh, just put it this way. After Thirdday twice-week I probably won't be in the storage rooms, refurbishing winter gowns, which is quiet and easy, I'll be stuck upstairs standing around in case Someone decides on impulse that this ribbon or that silk rose or the other embroidered lace is just too ugly, and has to be fixed on the instant," she said sourly, looking out the window. She always did that when she revealed something she shouldn't, as if by not looking at him she could pretend he didn't hear it.

He knew better than to repeat it. "Well, here's to the last days of freedom, or what passes for it here." He drank, set down his cup, and reached for her.

When the midnight bells rang Tarsa gathered her shawl close about her and he walked her to the narrow stairway, and leaned in the door as she ran lightly down and then sped over the path behind the vegetable garden.

Same way she had taken last visit--and the one before. He turned away, tsking to himself. Habit was just lethal in the spy business.

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Lasva's personal maid Merenda threaded through the merry-making servants to the inn's door, but outside, she hurried as fast as she could the princess's suite.

Lasva pointed to a scrap of paper in her hand. "My sister wants me home right now. By magic. And no one to know."

Merenda, trusted and trusty, said, "It shall be done. Swift or slow journey?"

"You're to arrive on Thirdday after next week." Lasva threw the paper in the fire. "Be as extravagant as you like, just see to it no one discovers I am not in that coach, or the hired rooms. The queen made reference to the Chwahir, and the mountain passes, but not why these things connect to me."

Merenda thought of the warrior kingdom beyond the northern mountains, the age-old enemy, and shuddered. Twice before she'd masqueraded as the princess, who transferred somewhere by magic. She would bundle up as if ill, and stay that way for the long coach ride, reading undisturbed, sleep in the very best rooms, and eat in solitary splendor.

Lasva took up the transfer token that she always carried on her no matter where she was, shut her eyes, whispered the words she'd been taught, and was wrenched out of the world then shoved back in again, standing on a Destination carpet in Hatahra's inner chamber.

Lasva groped, found a chair, and sat down abruptly, to wait for the hideous reaction to magic transfer to pass. The ache in her bones dissipated swiftly, the dizziness eased, and she was left staring not at her sister, as expected, but at Lord Davaud, the royal consort.

She stared up at him, her thoughts still scrambled by being forced out of time and space then in again; she looked at his jowly face, his intelligent gray eyes, as if she'd never seen them before. Slowly her wits returned. He was dressed formally, his single over-robe velvet, not shimmer-gauze, his under vest gemmed brocade, meaning there had been a

grand ball.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" he offered.

She shook her head. "My thanks, but I'm all right now."

"Queen Hatahra is still downstairs at the ball. She should be here soon."

Lasva nodded. Everyone knew she seldom stayed up after midnight. "The babe is safe?"

"Everyone is safe," he said. "Except, quite possibly, you."

"Me?" Lasva looked surprised, and for a fleeting moment thought of the Marloven prince. Then she dismissed the thought as ridiculous.

Davaud gestured toward the map on the great table. "The Chwahir have been spotted massing just their side of the border in the Eastern Pass," he said.

"The Chwahir," Lasva repeated, then she shook her head. "So it said in her note earlier. I'm having trouble understanding the connection."

"We don't know if there is one," came Hatahra's voice from the doorway, and both turned. "But I dislike the timing. Very much. I think, until we are reassured that Joras Sonscarna does not plan to come a-courting you with his entire army, you shall stay in your rooms."

She used the old future-will-be mode, reserved now for monarchs, rather than the future-conditional. Lasva curtsied in silent obedience.

Hatahra sank down tiredly. "Have the heralds been sent?"

Her consort nodded. Pointing to the map, he said, "To each House within two weeks' ride of the Pass. To all the other northern Houses I sent a herald ordering, in your name, a suitable host to be raised against need."

"Most of them will probably require the added time," Hatahra said wryly. "Except for our people along the Khanerenth border, we haven't had problems of this nature for, what, two or three generations? More. There will inevitably be a lot of unnecessary bustle."

Davaud nodded, wondering where the bustle would begin. It was his place to command the defense of the city, something that until recently had meant overseeing the city's budget for maintenance of roads and canals. Now, suddenly, his royal consort expected him to command the forces being raised and sent to the Pass.

Hatahra rose suddenly. "We are all tired. Come, Lasva, and see your niece, who smiles all the time now, the innocent smiles of one who demands only love. She is a refreshment to the spirit."

Lasva followed her sister to the baby's adjoining suite, in the old nursery where once she had lived. There before the doors she saw heralds wearing rapiers--some of them probably in storage since their great-grandfather's day--standing at guard, a sight not seen at the palace in generations.

## V. Of White Ribbons

For the next five days, each morning before dawn the Grand Herald, Lord Davaud, and the Seneschal met in the latter's rooms.

Their aggregate age was almost two hundred ten years, the Seneschal having lived eighty-three of those years. None of the three had the least experience with invasions, or anything even remotely like. The Grand Herald, who had attained his position through his meticulous scholarship, had been spending his evenings digging through all the archives to read up on personal accounts of previous attacks from the north.

The Seneschal, who had been chosen by the old queen for his ability to smoothly organize a royal palace, had no idea how to plan for this new threat: invasion. When Lord Davaud appeared, the Seneschal rubbed his age-spotted hands through his sparse hair, and the Grand Herald paused, pen poised over his paper. They looked up expectantly.

Lord Davaud had discovered that getting the necessary forces raised was no easy matter at all. "You are going to need to dig up every single treaty with every duchy--probably every House--that the royal House has made."

"How far back?" the Grand Herald asked, wincing.

"Say, five hundred years," Davaud stated, looking grim.

The Seneschal did not speak, but he knew immediately what it meant: some of the Houses were balking at raising and equipping forces. It cost good money to feed men and horses, refurbish up old armor, and maybe scout out new swords--money that many would far rather be spending on their lands, or on parties, clothes, and entertainment.

The two gray heads opposite Davaud's own bowed.

The Seneschal got up to leave, his mind revolving ways and means. The Grand Herald, presuming on a lifetime of amity, murmured to Davaud, "Ducal houses balking, eh?"

They both remembered back fourteen years, to when Matthias Altan--then just the ducal heir--had been abruptly, and with no reason given, sent packing by the queen at the very height of the season. Now Altan was the leader of the dukes.

"All," Davaud said, "except one."

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"You are not happy," Tatia Definaen observed, linking her arm with her cousin Carola, Duchess of Alarcansa, as they descended the staircase toward the dining room of Alarcansa's ducal palace.

Carola turned to her, a pucker between her brows. "Would you be happy after hearing that the wicked Chwahir might be coming to conquer us?"

"They won't succeed," Tatia said, sending a complacent glance down the marble sweep of the staircase. "They never have succeeded. The queen will stop them."

Carola flickered her fan in Wishes from Dreams mode. "I spoke to Master Nolan yesterday on this subject."

A little of Tatia's complacency eroded. "There's to be a magic battle? Oh, I trust not here, near *our* lands!"

"I don't know, but he said that all the watch-wards on the Pass were dissolved. All of them. That's why it took so long to notice the massing of the Chwahir army." She pointed behind them, where both knew the mountains lay.

Those mountains were high, and rocky, and the only three passes--one east, one west, one central--were narrow. Colend had kept it that way deliberately.



A good portion of Alarcansa lay on the slopes below the Eastern Pass, where the vineyards that formed their greatest trade asset basked in the late-summer sun.

Tatia nodded. That did sound like a problem, but Queen Hatahra had more than enough mages, and counselors, to address it.

No, there was something else disturbing her cousin. When Carola acted like this, her fan flashing in this or that mode then snapping shut and tapping suddenly, like the twitch of a cat's tail, Tatia knew it had to do either with *Her*, Princess Lasthavais, the person Carola hated worse than damnation--or with her new duke.

How to get closer to the real subject? She confidently patted Carola's round, dimpled hand with her own thin, bony one, and said soothingly, "The mages know what to do. And you have a duke now to obey the Oath Summons. You do not have to lower yourself to such tiresome duty." And saw by the slight jut of Carola's round little chin, the tautening of her smooth, peachy cheeks, that she'd hit close.

"Perhaps." Carola walked a few steps, frowning, then lifted her arm free. "Come. Tell me what you think."

Carola sped with light, tiny court-trained steps back up the other side of the staircase, Tatia following in wondering silence.

Carola didn't speak because she was thinking rapidly, sorting again through memories of what she'd believed until recently had been a superlatively happy month--ever since her wedding day.

She let her breath out slowly, counting the triumphs. She and her beautiful Vasalya spent each morning completely alone in her handsome suite, redecorated with his colors as a surprise for him before the wedding. They breakfasted together on the terrace above the herb garden, and then he attended her while she did business, always with the idea that he would one day take his share, especially of the vineyards. Not yet, of course. He had to learn how she wanted things, just as she had spent years learning from her old father, who had taught her that being firm and exact was the way to maintain their wealth. Overlook details, and those under you immediately take advantage.

And then afterward, there was always entertainment, either musicians, or parties, designed to please him. Twice she'd given extremely expensive masquerade balls for the baronage families who owed her fealty, just because she'd once overheard him saying he loved a masquerade. And after that they retired, always together, and he, in turn, was skillful and attentive, just as she required.

The brightest triumph of all: every morning, before that intimate breakfast, she

dismissed her maid and his valet, and with her own hands she tied back his silky black hair with a fresh white ribbon. Tatia had sentimentally informed her that the household considered that quite romantic. Carola nodded to the tribute, not telling anyone that the act gave her an exquisite flame of victory, of possession, in her vitals: he was hers, and she was quite certain that every single morning Lasva woke in her empty bed and felt the very same pain that Carola had once felt when the eyes of the man she'd chosen--the most beautiful and admired in Colend's court--had dared to drift indifferently past her to that damned black-haired princess, and smile. And *she*--who could have any man in any court on the continent--she had smiled back.

Vasalya was now Carola's, exclusively, and she showed her pleasure in his attentiveness with love-gifts--each day for the two weeks after they were married, now every so often. Clothes, rings, two fine new race horses that she'd ordered all the way from Sarendan, a racing carriage.

Everything, in short, was progressing well until four days ago, when the herald transferred in by magic.

They'd just begun hearing petitioners when her steward cleared the crowd, saying, over and over, "Message from the queen. Make way for the messenger from the queen."

The herald had come before them, and after all the formal folderol of greetings, she said, "Her majesty, having received word of the border being breeched by the Chwahir, requires your oath-stipulated defense force to be raised at once, and sent north to the Pass, there to await command from the consort Lord Davaud."

Carola remembered her own reaction of disgust. It meant a great to-do, assembling people who were far better employed at the grape-harvest. In specific it meant horses, men, swords, mud, sweat.

But surely she would not be required to preside over something so dreary, she had a man at her side--one who until this spring had spent a few years riding the eastern border against incursions from troublemakers from Khanerenth, as the Lassiters were cousins to the Thora-Dei family, who had charge of the border. What could be more perfect?

So she'd turned to her duke, saying, "I believe this charge of the queen's must fall to you."

And his face had changed, just for a moment. She had spent every day in his company for over a month, and had seen, she thought, all the range of his expressions, but she never had seen that lifting of the eyelids, the flare of long dimples in his lean cheeks before. Joy, that's what she'd seen. Sudden joy, just as suddenly hidden.

Joy--for the very first time.

She glanced through a window at the old east courtyard, framing which long ago had been the ducal garrison. Now those buildings were storage: unfashionable furniture, the best of the silk, the best wine.

It was in some wise a garrison again, some of the rooms having been hastily cleared out against the expected fifty young men. Fellows from her own household and her closer family holdings were down in the courtyard with her duke now, standing in their shirt sleeves despite the cool air, swinging their swords round and back and up in a kind of rhythm that Vasalya must have learned with his Thora-Dei cousins.

"Again!" she heard him shout. "I want tighter circles, and convincing blocks. Then we'll get out the wooden swords for some bouts."

"Hurrah!" some of the boys shouted, dancing about with glee.

"Now! One! Two! Three!" Vasalya roared, and his little army hastily took up their positions again, swinging their weapons.

What *kind* of joy was it? Was it really just the prospect of fighting--or had it, somehow, in some evil wise, to do with *Her*?

Carola frowned, feeling that old familiar burn in her guts.

Tap, tap, tap went the fan.

She drew in a deep breath. Everything was at it ought to be. There had been, previous to this royal herald, no messengers whatever, and her own personal maidservants had, under the pretext of showing his manservant where to put his personal things, searched every single item of his, leaving out not the smallest paint brush or inkpot. And Carola herself had gotten up their very first night and searched all through his clothes, right to the seams, finding no mementos whatsoever that could be attributed to *Her*.

Everything indeed as it should be.

But. There was that lightning-flash of joy.

"I believe I shall ride with him," she stated suddenly.

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" ... and Duke Matthias requests me to furnish this copy from the Altan archives," the old herald said, his face resolutely wooden as he held out a paper written in the court hand of two hundred years ago. "In it, his grace begs you to honor with your attention, you will find the marriage treaty between Prince Gaelan Lirendi and Lady Phosar Altan on Firstday Sixmonth, 4191. Under the third head, please note that the Lirendi Family would henceforth provide all sums required in an Oath Summons for Defense, the Altans being held to the numbers of riders. It was agreed that sums included the purchasing of equipment. His grace begs you will honor him with perusal of this statement here."

The Grand Herald pretended to look at the paper, but he already knew what it said. Two days ago he'd read the identical copy (duly noted and sealed by magic-seal) in the House archives.

" You must convey," he said, taking care to keep his voice even, "to his grace my infinite respect and duty, along with the following, which no doubt escaped his attention: 'Equipment' was defined, by law under Emperor Matthias Lirendi in 4258, as covering 'war horse, saddle, sword, shield, armor and any appurtenances required thereto'. The crown, therefore, sees its responsibility limited to fodder for mounts, and food for the warriors. Tents and clothing being considered 'appurtenances'."

"If you will forgive a moment's interpolation," the herald from Endralath murmured smoothly, "we might be able to clear up this matter with reference to the exact definition of 'equipment', for in our own treaty with House Lirendi, in 4317--which you will all agree postdates the reign of the great Emperor Matthias--"

The sound of horns caused them all to stop and look around. Silver horns, blown with sweet and heart-racing precision in triple falls of notes; the unfamiliar sound came from outside the Seneschal's formal audience chamber.

A young herald-apprentice ran in, wringing his hands, followed by one of the door heralds. "Forgive me, sir," this latter said, his eyes round with apprehension. "The Prince of Marloven Hesea rode right past the outer reception areas. They are *here!* They rode *horses* straight up to the *throne room doors!*"

"Who?"

"What?"

"Marloven *where?*"

And in strode Haldren Marlovair and his second cousin Tdan Marthdaun. They were, on their prince's orders, not dressed formally in their own House tunics (one blue, one brown) but in their winter fighting blacks, with new buckles to their belts, gold ones, which transformed the whole into Montredaun-An black and gold. Tdan bore the Montredaun-An eagle banner, and Haldren carried Ivandred's personal banner, the fox head.

Silence, as the group of heralds and the old Seneschal stared at these newcomers in their martial coats, knives at their sides, in their high boot tops, and just visible at their wrists, who had thundered straight past all the layers of polite interception ringing invisibly round the royal family.

Haldren and Tdan hid just how funny they found all those open mouths.

"We bear greetings from Prince Ivandred of Marloven Hesea," Tdan said.

"And on his behalf we request permission of Queen Hatahra to court the Princess Lasthavais Lirendi," Haldren finished.

"Most irregular," a woman whispered from the row of heralds in the back, busy writing down the proceedings for records, and "Where exactly lies Marloven Hesea?" from a very young herald-apprentice.

Above, unknown to anyone but the Grand Herald and Davaud, the queen sat by a listening-post, whose opening--emitting a faint smell of ink--was lost in the splendid carvings all round the ceiling of the interview chamber. And beside her sat Princess Lasthavais.

"Well?" Hatahra said to Lasva, her brows lifted wryly. "Here's another suitor, I gather?"

As she listened to the murmur of voices below, Lasva realized that her sister must have been informed of Prince Ivandred's approach soon after he and his riders were spotted crossing the border. And again when they appeared on the road leading to Alsais. Which was why she'd been invited to this secret place.

Therefore Hatahra's question *Here's another one, I gather?* did not mean *I'm surprised at his appearance*, but *Did you know he was coming?*

"So it appears," Lasva said, breathing slowly so her face would not heat up.

"If this past week is any indication, this winter is going to be simply fraught with suitors," the Queen murmured, as below the Grand Herald sent a crown runner out, then hedged for time by asking once again for the young men's names, that they might be correctly entered in the records. Hatahra added, "The first was Kholaver of Bren. Prince Hathian of Sartor send emissaries to inform us he is on his way..."

Hatahra, watching obliquely, took in Lasva's noncommittal response, her slight flush. When had Hatahra last seen her sister blush? "Before I form my answer, let me ask you this. You say you met this Marloven fellow?"

Lasva felt her heartbeat quicken. "We did not meet. I only glimpsed him once or twice on the river road."

"Is he someone you wish to invite as a guest, and acknowledge formally as a possible suitor? If no one has met him, then we don't know, after all, if he's even worse than our Brennish pest, whom we must tolerate if we're to honor our treaties with his father. We have no treaties, no embassies, nothing, with these Marlovens: we have the freedom of response. And of course you are officially still traveling, so there is even time."

Lasva drew in a deep breath, and once again she was back at the riverside, inn, weary, dreading another long night of joyless music--and looked straight into those startling eyes the color of winter ice. She still could not determine whether it was attraction or mystery that she found so compelling. Maybe it was both.

Hatahra watched her sister stare sightlessly at her fan, and smiled wryly. She had her answer, she rather thought, but courtesy demanded she not acknowledge what Lasva seemed to want hidden. So she stirred.

The shift of silken cloth was enough to break Lasva's reverie. She asked, obediently, "What have you in mind?"

Hatahra said, "To snap my fingers under Matthias Altan's nose. He's the leader of the ducal faction. His reluctance is partly because he's stingy, but partly because he's pushing me as far as he dares: he wants me to break down and grant new sanctions before he rides. Revenge, for he really had wanted to father the next royal heir," she added with a thin smile.

Lasva flicked her fan over the lower part of her face in Surprise then turned it over, indicating the opposite, and Hatahra's smile reached her eyes, just for a moment.

"Now, if we were, as publicly as possible, to offer this Marloven a royal alliance and request him to aid us in this problem, it might undercut Matthias and his allies at a

stroke. See, if the Marloven really does know something about military matters, Davaud could all but promise him to command, and just watch our dukes fume. Nothing they can do, if their hosts are still straggling all across the country, or sitting at home haggling over the price of a new piece of armor. Of course the alliance would imply that he is favored as a suitor--the official meeting to be arranged after your arrival home."

Lasva's thoughts veered from memory of that poor young Joras to Vasalya and arrowed once again to the memory of those light-colored eyes. If he agreed--they would meet. Speak.

Her heartbeat quickened. "Do it, then."



## VI. Of Silver Trumpets

When Prince Ivandred Montredaun-An of Marloven Hesea walked alone down the center aisle of the throne room--everyone who could possibly find an excuse to be there ranged on either side--Hatahra had only to watch that straight, slight figure with the hard-heeled stride so unlike the insinuating cat-grace of her courtiers, the fearless pale gaze, the callused hands, and know she'd sent the most effective possible challenge to her court.

She did not move or speak until the young man came directly to the foot of her throne. He did not bow, but stood with his booted feet slightly apart, and struck his right fist against his heart.

"Welcome to Colend, Prince Ivandred of Marloven Hesea," she stated in the clear, steady cadence that made it easiest for the heralds up in the left-hand gallery to take down every word spoken. "You are welcome as friend and as an ally to be trusted in time of need."

He struck his fist against his heart again, a gesture she found both strange and intimidating, but then he spoke the single line she, Davaud, and the Chief Herald had wrangled over all night:

"You have only to state your need, and I will prove that trust."

He said it smoothly, without hesitation, and clear, in that clipped accent of his. *What do the words really mean to him?* she wondered, then lifted her voice once more. "When can you be ready to ride to the aid of Colend against the threat of Chwahir invasion?"

"Now," he said, with a brief smile.

Hatahra heard the susurrus of whispers sough outward, and she almost laughed. Oh, this little drama would be talked of for days. Maybe years.

She turned to her consort, who stood behind her throne, wearing a splendid long battle tunic modeled on a painted and gold-leaved illustration the heralds had found in the Archive, after the Conflict at Skya Lake 97 years before. She thought he looked quite distinguished, so tall and sturdy with the long blue tunic worked with golden stars down its front, the muted gleam of fine chain mail at the gapped sides, his rich sword belt and his fine rapier.

But despite the care with which they had designed his war costume he didn't look, after all, quite as ... martial as this young fellow in his severely plain coat with its wide side-slit skirts, the blackness relieved only by the golden belt buckle at his narrow waist, and the golden top to the black handle of the long knife he wore at his side. If he wore chain mail, it was hidden beneath that tight-chested, long-skirted coat.

"Are you ready to ride, Lord Davaud?"

"I am, your majesty," he replied, the sonorous drawl pitched to be heard in the gallery where the scratching of quills could just be made out over the profound silence.

"Then I bid you go, protect our kingdom," she commanded, raising her hand, palm toward the northeast.

Lord Davaud stepped down from the dais to Ivandred's side. The Marloven evinced no surprise, no reaction at all. Merely turned, his coat skirts flaring, and matched pace with the consort. Together they walked out of the throne room to the great courtyard, where the courtly carriages had all been sent away, and the only people permitted were those ready to ride with the consort--including twenty-four Marlovens, so still and straight on their exquisite horses.

As many courtiers as could make their way out with due attention to precedence crowded out to watch, among them the grim-faced Duke Matthias Altan.

And so about half of them were there to see, amid Davaud's milling hosts in their fine armor and hastily-sewn (or age-green, attic-resurrected) battle tunics, this Prince Ivandred merely raise a gloved hand. One of his boys blew a stirring air on a trumpet, a sound unheard for centuries around that palace. Twenty-four lances with black and gold pennants attached rose to exactly the same angle, booted feet locked down straight into



stirrups.

Then the Prince's horse leaped suddenly into a gallop, tail high, and his twenty-four followers wheeled and raced after, the columns strictly side by side, horses nose to tail, the riders so easy on their backs the horse racers among the court felt their hearts seize.

And after them scrambled Lord Davaud's men, in no particular order, as fast as they could.

The court turned away, talking; the Queen stood alone on the top step between the massive doors.

Duke Matthias rubbed his heavy jowl, then indicated by sign he wished to speak. Hatahra gestured permission, and he stepped up beside her and murmured, just for her ears, "All right, Tahra, you win."

"Try to catch them, Thias," she returned, chuckling softly.

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Beyond the courtiers stood knots of servants, watching as best they might. The favored view was from the roof of the carriage storage building, where Kivic sat, smiling, with several of his co-workers. One nudged him, raising a tankard high. "Look at those foreigner boys ride, will ya? Wouldn't you love to get your hands on them horses?"

"You won't get within sniffing distance of them," scoffed a stableman from Kivic's other side. "Those Marlovens wouldn't let anyone so much as touch one a' their hoof-picks, much less a hoof."

Kivic said, waving lazily in the direction of the distant Matthias of Altan, "Duke Pinch-Copper looks like he's going to snap his fingers for his saddle at last."

Genial cursing met this announcement--curses of agreement. They slid off the roof down onto the bales of fresh-harvested hay, and dispersed to their duties.

Kivic eased away, smiling when he thought of the secret he'd prised out of his chatty chambermaid the day before: the princess was not on the road, she was *here*. Hiding. Transferred in by magic a few days ago.

Kivic had only been waiting for these fool courtiers to discover the bait massing in the outer passes and ride away. Now everyone was in place.

He wrote: *My liege, the crown is sending a force at last. Among them 24 Marlovens, riding east.* And sent the note via magic transfer.

Joras Sonscarna--king of the Chwahir--waiting a day's ride north of Alsais, well outside the far range of Hatahra's magic wards, received the message and frowned down at the paper. He and his carefully selected force had taken rooms at three trade inns, all of them dressed as day laborers. There was no disguising their round, flat, pale Chwahir faces, but this close to the mountains, Kivic had assured his king that Chwahir were often hired on the cheap for harvest time.

Joras crumbled the paper into his fist. Marlovens? He'd heard about them. But there were only twenty-four. Even if each of them fought with the prowess of Old Sartoran warriors in the legends, they could not defeat a thousand marchers massed up in the Pass, and more on the way, all waiting on his word to engage the queen's lace and beribboned court prancers, and make them all look like the fools they were.

He threw the paper into the fire. The court had ridden out: time to move.

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About that time Davaud was already regretting having chosen to ride rather than take a racing carriage.

They did not gallop long, something he was grateful for. Marlovens apparently knew how to make an impression, but they were equally careful of their mounts.

It was Ivandred who gave the signal for a slowing, the holstering of lances except for his two leaders, and then a walk.

Davaud was relieved. His hips hurt almost as much as the inner parts of his legs, and the back of his neck was awash in sweat from the sun beating down on the four layers he wore: thick quilting over a heavy linen shirt, and over that the chain mail, then the silken brocade on top of that.

He glanced at his companion whose black by rights would soak up sunlight, but he did not look red or sweaty. Though summer was over, that coat had to be hot; on closer look he suspected the weave was a mixture of cotton and wool, sturdy but friendlier to air than

silk over chain and woolen quilting.

His companion turned his way, then, and said, "What can we expect?"

Davaud said, "Expect? You mean, how many are there?"

A single nod.

"The wards were set up to signal alarms by magic if more than fifty were gathered in a given space. We do have some limited trade with the Chwahir, and there is even some visiting back and forth, but no one travels in such large groups. Forbidden either side," he explained. "Since the first alarm, our people at the old mountain watch posts have been trying to count the Chwahir. Several hundred at the least, probably with more coming up their side of the Pass."

Another single nod. "Any warning sent? Demands? Threats?"

"Nothing. Just the wards broken. No word or warning."

Ivandred's voice showed no emotion whatsoever. He said, in his abrupt accent, "What kind of strategy do they favor? What tactics can we expect?"

Strategy? Tactics? Davaud had felt like a fraud ever since the Queen had informed him he would be in command of this defense. But he wasn't one. He'd spent long, wearying nights for the past week reading old records of every battle of the past four hundred years--not that there were many after the multiple treaties that had broken up Matthias Lirendi's empire.

He'd read about the Battle of Skya Lake, where the Sentis family had faced off the Lirendis and lost. He'd read about the two abortive Khanerenth incursions, and the skirmish at Panson Bridge in Gaszin, a ducal conflict over inheritance that the last Queen Hatahra had had to settle. He'd finished by digging out the old chronicles of the last Chwahir invasion, and reading every single scrap written about it, in the long-winded language of the time.

None of it made any sense.

"Tell you what," he said to the waiting prince as he dug into one of his saddle pouches. "You take a look at these records yourself, and you tell me what you think." He handed the whole sheaf, all of it neatly copied out by Hatahra's scribes, to Ivandred.

Then he sat back, turning his neck from side to side to ease the stiffness that had somehow resulted from that wild gallop. When had he galloped last like that? He thought back ruefully. Probably around the time he fought his only duel---when he was twenty, and he and that hothead Basya Isqua hadn't known how to back down from a very stupid quarrel forced on them by a heartless flirt. He recalled the anguish of those days with an inward flutter of laughter. Now she was a staid matron, married to a southern baron, but in those days, no one could hold her. She badly wanted to heighten her prestige by getting someone to fight over her--so she could court the brother of the King of Sartor, visiting at the time. They'd all lost, and had been the better for it.

The purpose of a court, he thought, trying to ease his right hip by listing slightly to the left, is to avoid this war savagery. He had lived too long to expect everyone of high degree to come to court with brains, moral principles, and good will. The layers of language, behavior, even dance and fashion, all diffused the clashings of intent. People might, and did, get wounded, but not by steel. And so they lived to learn their lessons, as he and Basya and Firandel had, or did not learn, but no one lost lives over their determined pursuit of their passions.

The Chwahir, he knew, did not have the luxury of courtly rules. Neither did these Marlovens, it seemed.

"Parade," Ivandred said, breaking into his thoughts.

"What?"

Ivandred handed the papers back. "These are not battles. They are parades, at least this Skee-huh Lake one, and this other that took place either end of a bridge."

"Skya Lake," Davaud murmured. "Parade? If you will honor me with a clarification, I would be most grateful."

Ivandred pointed at the papers. "These rules binding who marches first, how close they come, maneuvering round one another, the heralds all at the side conferring and sending messengers running back and forth before the charge. And at the end, all that about hostages and ransom, and what is required of each rank, and all the women lined up watching their favorites. That's how we call a parade, a mock battle. It is not quite a wargame."

Davaud looked surprised. "But there have to be rules, or who's to stop a wholesale slaughter?"

Ivandred's pale eyes narrowed in a kind of cold amusement, but he said only, "These

Chwahir, they are mainly foot warriors and rely on numbers, so I have heard. I find it, ah, corroborated--" He said it Sartoran. "--in this report. How old is it?"

Davaud told him.

Ivandred was silent again, then he gave a slight shrug. "Much could have changed since then, but I have never heard a whisper of it. We shall assume a similar strategy, at least until we see them. If you have a map, I can show you how to plan for that, and break them up quickly."

It was about then that the servants riding in the back, with the lords' baggage and remounts, sent someone galloping forward with the report that the banners of Duke Matthias had been spotted behind them.

Davaud knew his duty. "It seems we shall be joined by more of the queen's force. Perhaps we can plan together," he suggested.

---

Duke Matthias caught up with them just before sunset, his horse in a lather, his entourage scattered in a chaotic line behind, followed by hastily assembled numbers of his allies, plus those courtiers who had decided they were not going to miss witnessing the most interesting event of an otherwise dull year. Davaud suggested they camp and plan. Altan insisted they wait to plan until his allies among the dukes, and their liege-barons, all arrived.

While the nobles jostled for precedence in the turmoil of a camp being hastily set up under gathering clouds, and Ivandred quietly saw to his men, a day's ride to the east the Duke and Duchess of Alarcansa completed their second day on the road.

When they reached the carved plinth indicating the border of a liege barony just ahead, Carola put out her hand and summoned her duke to her carriage.

"Time to camp?" he asked, obediently saluting her outstretched hand with a kiss.

"No." She pointed Baroness Mayra Valsin's castle on the next ridge. "We will stay with Mayra, in a civilized manner," she said.

Vasalya bowed, hand to heart, then rode away to convey her orders.

Carola realized her voice had been short, and fought against irritation. She prided herself on her excellent manners--on no one, ever, knowing what she was thinking. She especially hated being short with her beloved, but it was difficult to maintain serenity after a long, hot, boring day alone in this carriage. Vasalya had politely refused to sit in it beside her, saying that he must ride with the men, to be seen by them, to be accessible to them.

Was that a necessity of the warrior habit of mind? She had no experience of that so no argument could be made.

Mayra of course made them as welcome as if they had been invited, or expected. After a fine meal Carola indicated, with a glance at her duke, that she was weary from the day's travel, and wished to retire. Her guest chamber was comfortable enough, but it was not Carola's own chambers, and even more taxing, Carola was certain that she would be forced to rise early the next day, if she were to have her morning time with Vasalya. She wandered around, looking at things and fighting to resume her serenity, but time wore on, the duke strangely silent as he gazed out the window.

Finally Carola stood in the middle of the room, furiously tapping her fan on her palm.

Flick, flick, flick.

The sound was not loud, but she became aware of it in this silent room. Yet she seemed to be the only one to hear it. Just what was her husband doing, if not making her distress his own distress? She turned her head, and indeed, there was no attentive duke, but an absent one still staring out the window, as if whatever existed there held more importance than his duchess. The realization was just one more affront to the civilized mind. Enraged past endurance, she said venomously, "Chwahir. The first time in hundreds of years. It would be just like Lasthavais to be at the root of it."

Vasalya's chin jerked, and he faced her.

Carola had never seen that that narrow look, the white mouth before. Hatred flamed, blood-hot, but she kept her teeth gritted, wishing she had not lowered herself even that much. Until now she had never permitted any mention of the loathed Princess Lasthavais to cross her lips.

Would he dare to defend *Her*?

He spoke, but the words were utterly unexpected: "What makes you think there is a connection between the Chwahir in the Pass and the princess?"

He didn't say her name, Carola thought with a faint spurt of triumph. It enabled her to regain enough to control to speak in her customary well-modulated tones. "It's just that the birth of the heir and the rumors of suitors and the arrival of these Chwahir, all three at once, raise my suspicions. But if the queen apprehends no connection, no doubt it is mere coincidence. I don't pretend to comprehend the warrior mind."

That little jab of acid was a reminder of her two long days alone in the carriage, but he didn't react.

In truth, he didn't hear them. His eyes were turned toward his wife, but his mind returned to its consideration of the map of Colend.

The Pass. Alsais. Heir, suitors ... and, a memory from before he left the royal city, the awkward, scrawny Prince Joras Sonscarna, refusing to dance with anyone but the innocent, stunningly beautiful teenage princess, scandalizing the entire court.

The possibilities assembled into conviction as he followed his wife's lead in her evening routine. By now he had learned to shut his mind away, leaving his body to follow orders; a month's habit now set his thoughts free to consider what was likely, and what must be done, while the rest of him performed his part in Carola's rituals.

He knew better than to say anything more than he had. He waited until, at long last, Carola's demands had all been met and she sank into deep sleep. Then he rose soundlessly.

He'd dressed, roused his best ten men, and had penned a short note to his wife before his valet had managed to rouse the stablehands and get eleven of their remounts saddled. The man appeared at the door, gesturing that all was in readiness.

Vasalya hesitated over the note. *Carola: I realize you were right, and the Chwahir must be making a feint toward us, while converging on the capital. I ride to warn the queen.*

He knew he ought to add some diplomatic sentiment, but he resisted. Were he wrong, it would never be enough. Were he right, the accolades of the court would diffuse his true motivation, and Carola's pride in the accrued glory to Alarcansa would occupy her mind.

But most important, though he could act the ducal part as she desired--that arose out of a lifetime of court manners--he could not bring himself to material falsity. He would write nothing that was not true.

So he just signed his name, and left the note on her bedside table.

And soon was riding west, breathing the clean air through a misting rain, his heart so light he forced himself to face the truth: that even with the prospect of hacking up unknown Chwahir or being hacked up, he *was* happy. He was, for the first time in weeks, really free. Tired as he was, riding west away from Alarcansa was like leaving prison. There were no wifely eyes watching him every moment, no sweet court lisp catching him up by asking what he was thinking, if his thoughts were perceived to be straying away from her. He did not have to invent acceptable excuses, and then hard-rein his attention on her, and only her, day and night. He had not, until this moment, permitted himself to consider how she watched his every breath, every move, every bite and sup, how her soft little fingers had rifled through every belonging of his, no matter how inconsequential, how with calm deliberation she made herself mistress of the contents of every one of the few letters he'd had occasion to write. How, he discovered through his valet, every letter sent him was seen by her first.

How she would watch his thoughts if she could.

His mind flicked back to that single interview with his father, lounging there in the crumbling ruin of their ancestral home: *Yes, you know your own debts, and think you can pinch and contrive to pay them, but you don't know the extent of mine. The truth is, boy, you had a pleasant race and might have caught a princess, but our creditors know there's no chance of you marrying the Lirendi fortune, now that there's an heir. When they come after us, and they will soon, the family will be ruined.*

The debts were gone, the price ...

Carola had offered him title, fortune, and herself, showered him with gifts before and after the wedding. And every morning since, as she spoke the sweet language of devotion in her smiling lisp voice, and bound his hair into fresh white ribbons with her own hands, she made it very clear that she had not just bought the person of a duke, but she also owned his heart.

He knew it was dishonorable to think these things. At least he would preserve a semblance of honor by never speaking them aloud.

The truth was this. Freedom, however brief, was sweet. Even sweeter was the possibility that he would see Lasva, that he might get the chance to tell her why he'd really left court years ago, and why he'd come back now that she was old enough to court--that he'd only waited this spring to see if attraction ripened to love for them both. Then the queen announced the prospect of an heir, and it was too late. Just once more, and the memory would have to last a lifetime. He would honor the bargain he had made to rescue his family from ruin, and that meant he could never see her again.



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## VII. Of Empty Hands

Ivandred was amazed at how long it took to convene Colendi nobles for a simple strategy session. First a great tent had to be erected, and then there was a carefully negotiated debate about precedence. Servants paced off the spaces where each man would stand, other servants set up refreshments in gilt porcelain dishes, while Ivandred was aware of the sun moving steadily across the sky behind the gathering clouds.

But at last they were all gathered, and Davaud and Altan had agreed that Ivandred, as ranking man and new royal ally, had the position directly before the royal map, duly unrolled by the herald who had carried it like a couched lance, bound by ribbons in the royal colors, golden seals dangling and swinging at every step.

Ivandred assessed the enormous map as each noble around him covertly scanned his own territory, evaluating how the royal heralds had drawn and labeled it. What Ivandred saw were elaborate drawings of ducal and lordly banners in each territory; within the territories tiny etchings of cities, with the colors of principal guilds, the drawings of nobles' homes almost down to the level of gardens--but not one hint of where forges lay, or mines, or military establishments. Nor any symbols where one might reasonably find such items. Not a single straight military highway, just long, meandering roads carefully respecting borders.

Ivandred laid a finger on the easternmost of the three golden-labeled passes. "You say it is here, they come?"

"Yes," Davaud said. "This pass, just northwest of Alarcansa. We should be meeting the new duke on the road northward in about four, maybe five days, if we ride faster--"

"What is here of strategic importance?"

Strategic importance? Ivandred saw the uncertainty in the well-mannered faces around him, and said, "Your royal castles--holdings? Mines and forges? What would the queen lose that he could take here?"

"Nothing but vineyards, really," Davaud said. "It's closest to Alarcansa land, but the principal ducal castles are all south. Anyway the Alarcansas will be sending their two hundred northward, and of course we are riding to their aid."

"There was no threat, no demand."

"No."

"If he wants the kingdom, your royal city lies here directly below the middle pass."

"But that pass has the most wards protecting it. Only parties of four are permitted through at a time," Davaud said. "And the royal city itself has transfer wards all over it, extending out a full day's ride in all directions. No one can get in and out by magic transfer without our mages knowing."

Ivandred waved that information away. "How long have the Chwahir been seen in these mountains?"

"Over a week, more like ten days, given travel time of the news."

"Then they wish to be seen, to draw your forces."

"Of course." Everyone agreed on that: if you were to have a battle, a place was appointed, the forces lined up, everything according to expected rules.

"You do not comprehend. It is not an attack. That makes no sense. It is a--a--" Ivandred did not know the word in Sartoran--and so he said it in his own tongue, and then lifted his hand, miming a feint before a strike.

"A trick?" Davaud asked, feeling a stomach-dropping sense of not just dismay, but impending disaster. He summoned all his knowledge of the military terms he'd read in those old records. "A ruse?"

"Ruse, yes," Ivandred said. "But against what?"

"A ruse, a ruse?" The word whispered back through the crowd inside the tent, and then to those gathered outside of it.

Ivandred looked around. These people were not stupid, they were just lethally inexperienced. How to educate them quickly?

"Suppose it were possible to slip men through one of these other passes. Over a period of time previous. What would they want to take first? Assuming they are not mad enough to try to take the royal city without a full army."

Duke Matthias, of course, immediately thought of his own home, and the mines in his hills, but Davaud cast back several years to Joras Sonscarna's visit, and the subsequent (and steady) prolonged waits, and veiled insults, that the queen's emissaries had had to endure from him ever since. Swallowed, and not referred to, because she did not want to risk war; because she had not stopped her courtiers from high-handed treatment of a hated Chwahir.

All except--

"Lasva," he whispered. Then he shook his head. "No, even a Chwahir wouldn't do that."

"Take the princess?" Matthias said, cutting one of his own barons off mid-word. "Oh, wouldn't he just? Why, it makes sense. Damned sense. Remember how he followed her around like a hound after a tidbit, and didn't the younger folks laugh?"

"She's no longer the heir," someone in back murmured.

She was no royal heir, whose disappearance could cause a war. She was now just a spare princess to be married off wherever an alliance needed cementing. The impossible swiftly became possible in all the minds of those who remembered Joras's dogged devotion to Lasva, how he'd refused to dance with anyone else, how the court had retaliated with subtle insults.

"But she's somewhere on the road," the Duke of Isqua pointed out.

"No she's not," Davaud admitted. "We've had her safe in the palace for days. Or what we thought was safe."

They all thought of the entire court pouring out onto the roads, riding toward Alarcansa.

It was Matthias, and not Davaud, who turned and roared, "Ride back! At once!"

Ivandred said, "Wait--" But his voice was lost.

He didn't bother with a second attempt. Instead, he stayed there at the map, measuring with his eye. Assuming the Chwahir was indeed coming over with abduction in mind, and the princess was in Alsais. If Joras knew that, and had positioned himself before feinting to the east ...

He looked around, saw that the nobles had all vanished, leaving their servants with the fine silver trays filled with food and the two heralds busy scribbling down everything they'd heard.

Ivandred ran out, whistling to his trumpeter. He was in the midst of issuing his orders when Davaud arrived, panting.

Ivandred sent him a look over his shoulder, then said briefly, "Ride north. Intercept."

Davaud fought for breath. Behind him, Matthias had used his rank to start ordering everyone about. Out of habit, they all obeyed. The orders were contradictory as he thought of new ideas. In contrast, Ivandred said three or four things in his home language and his men turned to well-drilled tasks. Their tents snapped to, the horses' shoes were checked, weapons stashed, bows slung. In the time it took for Davaud to get his breath back the Marlovens were ready to ride--and behind them, Matthias was still roaring orders, the camp a chaos of scurrying servants, half-collapsed tents, everyone talking or demanding or ordering and no one listening except the bustling servants.

"I'm riding with you," Davaud announced.

"We will ride fast," Ivandred warned. "And we have only our own remounts." He indicated the string of horses behind the last of the riders, some of them lightly weighted with rolled tents and poles and cooking equipment.

"I know who has fast horses," Davaud said, thinking regretfully of his hips. But he could see Hatahra's face. Whatever the cost, he had to be there. And so he would be.

They rode out, quite suddenly, unnoticed by Matthias, who was arguing with the Duke of Gaszin and two barons about whether or not it was possible with the forces at hand to surround the royal palace--surrounded in their turn by the servants and cooks and stablehands still buzzing about like bees in the shambles of their camp.

The only ones who noticed were the heralds, silently writing everything down.

---

Kivic had already ascertained that Lasthavais drank caffeo, and he knew whom in the kitchens to relay false messages to and whom to commandeer. "Here, the queen said that this is to go to the princess's suite," he said.

The girl rolled her eyes. "But she isn't here."

Kivic smiled his charming smile and shrugged. "Orders."

The girl sighed, giving an irritated shake of her shoulders, but she took the tray. Everything had gone crazy, it seemed, but she was obedient, and so she carried the tray upstairs, and scratched at the princess's outer door. And to her surprise the door opened and a day maid appeared. She looked down at the tray, hesitating.

"The queen sent it," said the runner.

With a faint shrug the day maid bore the tray inside, closing and locking the door. She brought it to Lasthavais's inner parlor, where the princess sat peacefully reading.

"Caffeo, from her majesty," the maid said, when she looked up.

Lasva said, smiling. "Thank you."

She poured the drink out and sipped, frowned a little. Was the chocolate not quite sweetened? There was a subtly bitter edge to the flavor. She poured the cup back and swirled the pot around, poured more, and drank that. A little better, though some of that taste remained. She set the cup down.

But two sips were enough. The handsomely written words on the page of the book she'd been reading flickered and swam, and a huge yawn forced her jaw open.

She rose; the sound of her moving brought her maid. "I think I will take a nap," Lasva said. "You don't need to wait. Go and get a meal. Maybe find out if there is any news."

The maid whisked herself out, locked the door and sped downstairs, not realizing until much later, after endless whispered reviews of this terrible day, that her mistress's thoughtfulness had saved her life.

---

Kivic climbed over one of the balconies in the empty consort suite and made his way to

Lasthavais's chambers. The windows were open to the summer breeze, as he'd expected. He found no servants. Just as well. There would be no chance of getting them to drink sleep potions like the rest of the upstairs staff, and he hadn't really looked forward to killing any terrified young girls.

The princess lay on her bed alone, deeply asleep.

He looked down at her face. He had never been this close to her. Even in sleep the curve of her lips was exquisite, her coloring vivid, her brow intelligent. What would be her reaction if she opened her eyes?

It was bizarre. He was alone with a princess, the very one half the toffs on the continent seemed to want. He ran his hands lightly over her pale yellow gown with its complicated folds, exquisitely stitched in a floating, faintly gleaming fabric unheard of in Chwairsland, where the women dressed sturdily against the ever-present cold. He followed with a finger the artful curves of her blue and gold-embroidered lace, checking for hidden pockets and transfer tokens, or magical notecases. Nothing. She had expected to be alone.

He paused and studied her.

Beautiful she was, with will to match wit to wit. What would her life be like with Joras Sonscarna and his somber moods?

Kivic laughed soundlessly, and by searching around located the wardrobe, pulling out a summer cloak with which he wrapped her up.

Then he trod to the doors to unlatch the locks, and just in time, for there were two of Joras's men, wearing lamentably ill-fitting Lirendi servant garb that Kivic had smuggled out.

They took up station, watching in all directions, and there was Joras himself. He alone did not wear servant garb, but there was no one to see him in his sturdy sober-colored riding gear as he looked around appreciatively, and then at Kivic's silent, open-handed gesture, went to claim his bride.

She never even stirred as Joras picked her up. In silence he stood holding her against him, at last, at last, the fresh sage scent in her hair making him almost dizzy.

"Let's go," he said to his men, who were all watching, waiting.

In silence the Chwahir filed out, Kivic closing and locking the doors behind him.

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## VIII. Of A Black Coat

It was about noon, after Vasalya and his little troop had at last stopped for something to eat while the stable man went to scout fresh mounts, that he realized he was on the right road, but with the wrong message.

Stupid with too many nights of shorted sleep and then one night with no sleep at all, he tried to force his tired mind to gather the instinctive warnings and hold them long enough to make sense of them.

Think! If Joras of the Chwahir drew off the court forces to the east, even if the departure of the court served as a signal to launch another force down through one of the other passes, there would be word sending Davaud straight back. And wouldn't his and Davaud's forces arrive at the same time at the royal city? What does that accomplish, besides a lot of killing?

The feint, then, only makes sense if he's already *here*.

Not an army. That would have been noticed. But, say Joras himself. And a small host, slipped through one at a time, maybe, yes, since the news was released about the new heir.

And if he's here, his goal would be ...

"Here's your caffeo, my lord," said his valet.

Vasalya drank it off, his eyes stinging against the scald on his tongue. Good. He gasped, fighting the pain. At least it cleared his head a little.

So, assuming Joras is here--

"North."

Two of the men said, "What?"

Vasalya shook his head.

Neas came stomping in, a wide grin slashed across the man's sun-browned face. "Horses ready, your grace."

"We're going to ride north and intercept the Chwahir who I begin to believe are already riding down from the middle pass. Any objection?"

For answer a mighty fist crashed down onto the massive oaken table, making all the dishes jump. "Let's go!" the man roared.

They ran out. The rain was steadily increasing. *Good*, Vasalya thought wearily, as he mounted up. *If it slows us up, it will slow the Chwahir, right?*

---

Joras had never actually carried anyone before. Before he'd gotten outside the huge palace, his shoulders and wrists were already protesting, and his breath came short and fast. He regretted having given over the old courtyard drills he'd had to do as a boy. Kingship meant inspections of parades, not parading. It also meant hours of magic study on top of other demands, leaving little time for sweating at target practice.

But he was not going to let anyone else touch her.

So he hitched her up, shifting the burden a little differently, grateful that Kivic had thought of the sleepweed. Carrying an awake woman who might be struggling--He veered away from that thought very quickly. That she might not want to come with him he'd only permitted himself to consider briefly, and not at any length. Of course a Colendi would refuse a Chwahir, even one like her, though there was no one like her in the entire world. Again he remembered those days of anguish when he first came to Colend's court, how the courtiers had laughed at him behind their fans, all but the young princess, who had been so kind, first teaching him how to dance down the empty halls, and in front of the others pretending his stumbles were hers.

Yes, just let him get her to Narad, and make her a queen, and he would give her anything she asked for, and then she would change her mind. Yes, that was the way to think.

Until then ... he found his footsteps slowing, and forced himself to walk faster. They were



in no wise safe. What if some fool ran up to that room to see if she wanted her ribbons changed? Most of the court was probably on the road east, but that left plenty of servants to raise an alarm, and though he wasn't afraid of a fight--would welcome it, preferably with some of those strutting, drawling windbags he'd been forced to ignore all those years ago--he knew that slaughter of her countrymen wouldn't help his cause with Lasthavais.

At a nod his men spread out, on the watch, as they slogged straight north, churning up the rich red soil that was so very scarce north of the mountains and so plentiful here. First through the rose garden, then past an empty wing of the palace, and ah, at last to the woody area beyond. Not long now, and they'd reach the old fence that he had learned on his previous visit marked where one of the versions of the royal palace had lain, centuries before--destroyed, as it happened, in a conflict with his own ancestors.

Well. Kill that thought, and breathe in the sharp smell of these evergreens that reminded him so relentlessly of home. It was the leafy trees, with their startling orange and gold and red leaves, that were so strange; not enough sun penetrated Chwairsland for any but the hardiest to grow. Evergreens, though, he had in plenty.

Mixed with the scent of crushed evergreen needle-mat was the smell of his own sweat (pouring now down his back, despite the rain) and crushed flowers, it all seemed curiously unreal, and made him want to laugh.

He looked down at his burden, saw rain beading up over the satin of her cloak. Was that thing warded, or was she getting sodden? She would be cold if so.

"Fence ahead," one of the men cried.

Joras had a new thought, and turned to find Kivic's snub, cheery face not far behind. Kivic had shed his Colendi servant tunic and wore plain, dark clothing. "I take it you cannot return?"

Kivic smiled mischievously. "Afraid not. You wanted speed. It won't take the queen long to find me behind things."

"Ah, well." A mystery abduction would mean far more astringent rules and wards, but whatever happened next, he intended to get someone else inside that palace.

His Lasthavais might still be queen of Colend, if he could contrive it.

---

Ivandred discovered that Lord Davaud's face was nearly as gray as his hair. He whistled for his current aide, and when the boy came forward, he said in Marlovan, "Give the Colendi a willow stick."

Davaud was concentrating so hard on staying in his saddle without making complaint or fainting right onto the turf speeding by beneath the horse's heels he was startled when a horse drew near, and one of the young Marlovens held out what looked like a twig.

"Treated willow bark," Ivandred said. "Chew it."

Davaud obeyed. The bitterness caused his tongue to pucker and his nose to burn, but he kept grimly at it, and the reward was a gradual but steady easing of the pain radiating out from his hips and thighs.

Causing him to reflect on what kind of life these boys must lead, to have need of medicine that you could chew on the road. Then that was forgotten when he realized where they were. "I believe we're north of the palace now," he called. "It should be just a short ride that way." He pointed.

Ivandred raised his hand, and the cavalcade came to an immediate stop. "Lead us in," he suggested, indicating Davaud take the forward position.

"Let me have a look from that hillock right there," Davaud said, pointing to his right, where a cluster of wild hickory and young oak grew in profusion above a little waterfall.

He urged his horse off the road and up a little path adjacent to the fall, while behind him Ivandred had his riders gear up and change horses.

"If we find them. Do we fight to kill?" Haldren asked, in Marloven.

Ivandred considered, while watching the old Colendi up on the hillock. He noted Lord Davaud was smart enough to keep himself mostly screened behind shrubbery as he gauged his approach.

"Not our quarrel," he said after some thought. "No honor, either, if there are fewer of them than us, which is probably the case if they're doing a covert grab-and-run."

Haldren nodded. Abductions of women were not unknown to Marloven history, though not recently; they'd mostly happened back in the days when the kingdom was splintering

under the old Montrevayir and then Olavayir kings. Sometimes the brides planned the abductions themselves. In fact, those were the only ones that were usually successful. The other kind tended to end in disaster, sometimes with the bride killing the groom, other times torching off a war between entire jarlates.

"Fight to disable," Ivandred said finally. "If they have the princess--if there's any threat, any danger to her, they're yours."

Fierce joy rippled through the two columns, but no sound was made, not on a reconnaissance pause.

To Davaud's observing eye they once again displayed their astonishing discipline, barely making a sound as they unlimbered some weapons, then unhooked the helms from their saddles--helms that had caught his attention once more by the long hair affixed to the helms' crowns. He had assumed it was horse hair--had learned once the western barbarians put horse hair on their helms because he remembered asking his tutor *What becomes of the horse?* but as he studied Haldren's a little closer, he saw locks of long, glossy auburn that could not have possibly belonged to any animal with claw or hoof.

Davaud fought nausea, and the cold grip of fear--emotions he had not felt since the night before his duel. He forced himself to accept the truth--war was serious to the Marlovens, as in the deliberate dealing of death. *And so I know why they are so efficient.* Lasva needed that efficiency right now. So he made his way back down, and said, "Over the bridge, and that fork. That road runs just above the wall round the old palace ruins. We're nearly there."

Ivandred motioned to his two scouts. "Ride ahead, and watch for sign," he said.

They took off, Davaud and Ivandred following more slowly.

---

Lasva was dreaming of swimming in Lake Skya. Her governess kept calling for her to come out, that winter was coming, and Lasva obediently tried to swim her way, but the lake shore kept receding, the waters gradually getting deeper and darker, and she was cold, and tired, and--

And heard rasping breathing just above her, not her own. And voices, talking softly, but not in the familiar cadences of her home tongue. She was aware at once of a crick in her neck, her mouth tasted disgusting, and her legs from the knees down tingled from circulation interference. She was being carried, and the voices, if she was not mistaken,

were speaking Chwahir.

The instinct to panic, to fight for freedom, quickened her heart, but she quelled it. Better to stay as she was, listen, and learn. She was in enemy hands, that was obvious, though how or why was unclear. But she was quite sure if they knew she was awake, she would lose the only weapon she had: surprise. She risked a peek, to discover that her face was covered by cloth. Very well, then. Steady, steady, listen.

Lasthavais stirred, her muscles tightening, and Joras correspondingly tightened his grip. He looked down, just to encounter the hood of her cloak over her face, keeping it hidden. But almost immediately she relaxed again, and relief pooled inside him.

---

Marloven scouts sped over a slight rise thick with silver-leafed aspen. Davaud, Ivandred and the two columns of Marlovens saw the scouts like flickering shadows between the pale trunks, and halted.

"Foot warriors waiting just over that rise to the north," was the report. "Ranged for someone coming up the cart path from the south. We heard voices beyond the wall, in a wood. They'll meet fairly quick."

"Terrain all wood?" Ivandred indicated their surroundings with one gloved hand.

"Yes. Rough, rocky."

"Too late to separate their parties, then," Ivandred said. He motioned, dividing his tiny force, adding, "No bows. Swords only." Then he spoke in quick Marloven: one group to attack from the south, making all the noise possible, the others to close in from the north. A scout went with each party to position them correctly, and they rode out.

What chance had Joras now?

Not much.

Chwahir don't fight on horseback, their kingdom is far too rocky. They heard the thunder of horsehooves from the south, and turned about in time to see a tight wedge formation of yellow-haired young warriors on horseback soar over a jumble of rock and a fallen tree trunk, and then everyone was fighting.

And Lasva chose that moment to jam her elbows out. Joras, taken by surprise, dropped her with a squelch into the mud.

The second party attacked from the north, and Ivandred saw within two heartbeats that he was going to win, for despite their numbers the Chwahir had no time to assemble into any kind of defense, and further they did not know how to fight upward toward mounted warriors.

So he turned his attention to the victim, in time to see the princess fall, roll, sit up. Instinct was faster than reason: he pulled a knife from his sleeve and spun it to her, recalling just as it left his hand that it was no Marloven woman there to nip it out of the air---it might even hit her, or she'd just squeal and jump out of the way, thus providing Joras with a weapon. Maybe to use on her.

But even as he ran forward, she put up her hands to catch the spinning dagger.

Of course she misjudged, for never in her life had she even seen a knife thrown, much less one aimed just over her head; the honed steel blade scored across her hand and wrist, then dropped. She scooped it up, ignoring her bleeding hand. And Ivandred mistook her desperation not to be recaptured--or even touched again--as gallantry, and felt his heart constrict.

Joras stepped toward her, then back when she dragged herself to her knees, holding the knife with both hands. Mud slimed her from eyebrows to heels, but she paid it no heed.

"Touch me and I'll use it," she said in a low, angry voice.

Joras stared at her in anguish as she glared back, her mind veering between unconnected thoughts like a toy boat tumbling down a waterfall: her ruined gown--Prince Ivandred--Joras all grown up. Strange, she hadn't realized it before, right there in the middle of his bony round face, those gooseberry eyes were *Landis* eyes: Sartor's royal family stared back at her from those eyes, from a centuries-old connection.

"I offer you a kingdom," he said numbly.

Lasva just stared back, too stunned to speak.

Ivandred leaped off his horse and joined them in three steps, Davaud limping behind.

"What do you suggest we do?" he asked Ivandred, wheezing from renewed pain.

Ivandred flicked a look from the tall, dark-haired Chwahir with the aggrieved face to the princess. The Chwahir stood there empty handed, while all around the fighting swiftly came to a close, and the Marlovens, having established control, stood silently, swords at the ready, awaiting command.

Ivandred looked away. He had no desire to kill this Chwahir king, but then he hadn't been wronged. He turned to Lasthavais to ask her judgment. Saw in her averted face, her shivering body, that she just wanted him gone.

"Take off," he said to Joras. And to Lasthavais, "We'll return to your sister."

Lasthavais nodded once in agreement. Now that the excitement was wearing off she was only aware of cold, and nasty mud, and a crashing headache from whatever it was she'd drunk. She exerted the last of her control to stand up straight, to avoid entertaining that staring Chwahir with a wild bout of weeping.

Davaud opened his mouth to demand that they seize the Chwahir, but he was not sure the Marlovens would obey him--and anyway he had no idea what they might do with a captured king.

No, things were better this way. Hatahra could do what she liked afterward. At least her sister was safe.

Joras looked around, saw his men disarmed, some wounded. All defeated, by a force less than half their number. "Let's go," Joras said, and his men picked up their weapons and wounded, the worst hurt heaved over the backs of the waiting horses.

Joras did not look back.

Ivandred tucked his riding gloves into his belt then held out a hand to help the princess to her feet. Her touch, muddy and clammy as it was, sent fire along his nerves. He heard her breath draw in, and she lifted those wide blue eyes, and once again her gaze made him feel both hot and cold at the same time.

As the steady rain washed the last of the mud from her face she looked down at her bleeding wrist, the mud-sodden cloak hanging uselessly from her shoulders. Ivandred flicked it off, and she stood trembling, shivering, in her wet cloud-gossamer gown that outlined every curve of her glorious body, the knife held slack in her fingers.

With a quick, decisive movement he unfastened his knife belt and slung it to Haldren to hold, then he undid his coat and set it around her. Last he took the knife, wiped it on his clothing, resheathed it in his sleeve then rebuckled his belt. One of his men brought up a clean bandage, which he himself wrapped around her wrist. No one spoke. The only sounds were the patterings of rain, and the squelching steps of the departing Chwahir.

Ivandred snapped his fingers and his horse danced up, head tossing. Ivandred lifted Lasva up to the saddle then mounted behind her, riding in his shirt sleeves. Davaud saw that he didn't even wear mail.

The Marlovens all removed their helmets and slung them at their horses' sides, then mounted up and resumed their formation. None of them spoke. Their discipline was extraordinary.

Davaud winced. Heaved himself back into the saddle. They began riding south, back down the cart path leading to the abandoned ruin.

Lasva's awareness of Ivandred's proximity blinded her to anything else. The musky smell of male sweat and his own scent, rising off the stiff, heavy coat, sent a burn of awareness down inside her chest to form a pool of hot fire in her belly.

Joras was already forgotten.

"Thank you," she said, when she was certain she could control her voice.

"I am sorry about the knife."

She gave a breathless little chuckle. "I'm sorry I didn't catch it." And, "Will you teach me that trick?"

His arm tightened around her, just briefly. "I will," he said.

Then they heard the sound of horse hooves, and everyone fell silent, the outriders ripping their swords from the saddle sheaths.

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Vasalya knew before they sighted the towers of the palace through the rain that this rescue was going to be a disaster. He'd counted on finding fresh horses halfway, but there had been not a single one anywhere: they'd all been claimed by the hordes still streaming to the east expecting to witness the spectacle of a fine battle.

But he and his troop plodded grimly on, their animals drooping, the men shivering from cold and exhaustion and hunger.

So when they sighted mounted figures riding out from between the aspen trees, Vasalya did not speak any orders, he just let his poor horse amble to a stop while he squinted into the rain.

Two riders resolved out of the gloom first, young men wearing black coats of a military cut. Remembering the rumors they'd heard, he assumed these were the Marlovens, holding swords. How had *they* gotten here? he thought, and then he shook his head. Of course they'd be the first to figure out the feint.

The fact that he'd been right permitted him a single breath of relief before cold shock hit him: right behind the outriders rode Davaud, barely recognizable hatless, his fine battle tunic sodden with rain, his gray hair writhing down onto his shoulders like worms.

And seated across the withers of the horse next to him, shrouded in a severe military coat, was Lasva, her rain-washed face splendid with heightened color. What had to be the Marloven prince rode behind her on the same horse, dressed only in shirt and trousers and boots.

"Vasalya," Davaud called, smiling wearily. "You figured out the Chwahir ruse, I take it."

"And I take it I was too late," Vasalya returned.

Davaud bowed over his horse's withers. "The thought is taken as the deed. As you see, we are safe." He avoided looking at young Haldren's helm, wondering what quality of 'safe' he could truthfully use if the queen demanded.

Vasalya forced himself to look across at Lasva.

She braced her shoulders back, and turned her head, to meet a glance like a blow from Vasalya's black eyes. His upper lip was long, his gaze steady; he did not speak.



She did not speak. How could she, when he rode there with that wilted white ribbon hanging down from his hair?

"Return to the palace with us?" Davaud asked, gesturing.

Vasalya forced himself to observe those two on the horse, for he knew that memory, later, must be exact, or the questions would torment him the worse. So he noted the muscular angle of the Marloven's arm round Lasva. It was an intimate grip, and she permitted it. More, she seemed, in a subtle way, to be leaning into his grasp. He briefly met the cool light eyes of the Marloven prince over her head, then he forced himself to look away toward the marble towers of Alsais's royal palace, just for a moment.

Then back to the consort. "Ride on, Davaud," he said, grateful for the years of court training, the month of enforced court mask in his personal life. "You seem to have everything well in hand. I have to return to my wife."

Wife. The word acted on Lasva like the sting of a lash, and she closed her eyes, trembling. Ivandred's arm tightened round her, sending new fire along her lacerated nerves.

Oh, Lasthavais! Vasalya could not forbear one last glimpse, vowing it would be his last.

Just in time to see her turn her face into the Marloven's chest.

It took the remainder of his strength but he rode eastward from the palace, and the canals, and the royal city, his tired, dejected men with him. And before long he was able to occupy himself with the little details of life: where they might stay, how he could get mounts and food. His lack of funds, how to arrange for more. How he would reward these men.

Rain fell steadily, and his mind ran on and on, making logistical decisions.

Only once did he give in to impulse, when at last they found an inn along the river marking the border into Alarcansa. There in his room he took out the knife that he'd never used, and hacked off his hair, throwing it and the ribbon into the fire.

It was done, and quickly, in the time his valet left to fetch supper. When the man returned, his eyes widened in surprise, but he said nothing.

No one said anything, except Carola, when at last he rejoined her, after two long, rainy days of travel, always east. He found her cavalcade in the streams of people clogging the roads southward from the Pass from which the Chwahir, without warning, had retreated.

She saw the shorn curls falling, unkempt, on his forehead and over the tops of his ears, his neck bare. Hair far too short to be tied back. It changed his face. Made it harder, somehow, or was that just her imagination?

She waiting with mounting impatience until they were alone, and then, with her ever-present smile and watchful eyes she said in her sweetest tone, but with just the barest hint of accusation, "My dear Vasalya, I am almost afraid to ask what happened to your lovely hair."

"An act of war," he said.

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