

A close-up portrait of a person wearing a dark, textured hood. The person's face is mostly in shadow, but their eyes are a bright, glowing orange color, looking directly at the viewer. The background is dark and indistinct.

IRINEL RAMONA FLORESCU

KING'S HOST
BOOK ONE

To my wonderful husband, who had the patience to bear with my moods during the year it took me to write this book, to read every little change and listen to my constant prattle, who supported my effort—or madness, depending on who you ask—and encouraged me whenever I lost confidence and wanted to give up.

This book is for you.

Many thanks...

To my little brother, who, despite being quite the nitpicker sometimes, had the patience to read and review the book since the very beginning and encouraged me to keep going. And to my entire family for supporting me, despite speaking no English and, therefore, being unable to read the book as it is.

To my friend Ana, who was very kind to beta read the book and gave me not just encouragement, but valuable feedback and a lot of useful tips.

INTRODUCTION

The unforeseen birth of a book

Dear readers,

Thank you for picking up this book!

Although my full name is Irinel-Ramona Florescu, I never use the middle name and, besides my family, few are even aware of its existence. There is nothing unusual about that, except in this case it tends to create some confusion on the first meeting—which I grew to enjoy, to be honest. As much as it sounds like an affectionate Romanian diminutive, Irinel is in fact the male form of Irina. The only woman I ever heard of bearing this name is the same one which inspired my parents to give it to me, unless it is an excuse they made up. People have asked for *Mr. Irinel Florescu* on numerous occasions and, during high school, there was a recruitment form for the mandatory military service issued on my name. I should add that the middle name is as feminine as it can be.

Until I completely lost my wits, as my husband kindly tells everyone, I was an interior designer and a CG artist—and will continue to be, hopefully—with a fondness for romance, handicrafts, Japanese anime and hiking. I have a soft spot for woods, among other things, so long as no bear crosses paths with me. However, talking for hours without growing tired is, according to my family, my most prominent talent, which became apparent around the time I began to speak. I wish I could disagree with them, but I clearly remember that, as a child, the lack of a dialogue partner never stopped me from enjoying wonderful conversations, since I could make up as many as I wished. Alas, as an adult this tends to raise more than just eyebrows. Now these conversations happen mostly in my mind, although I still speak with animals a great deal—but who doesn't?—and, occasionally, with trees and... with trees.

As much as I enjoy talking, writing has been an irk ever since I was in school. The struggle to find the right word or expression, to be articulate, but not superfluous and boring, that has always been a turn-off. There are plenty of tedious tasks I would gladly choose over writing an explanatory email, a review or an essay—thank God school years are far behind! At my husband's

suggestion I started this as an exercise, a playful brain workout designed to help me overcome the dislike of writing. Not a study in creative writing and most certainly not a story for public viewing. But things never progress as you expect them to, do they? One thing always leads to another so, a year and a handful of grey hairs later, this is the result. Am I struggling less now? Not really, but writing is growing on me.

It was supposed to be a short tale: a thin story for structure, a few expositions for practice, and a whole lot of dialogue for my own pleasure. But it grew, like those conversations which begin with a casual remark and a glass of wine and, by the time you realize it, it is already morning, there is more than one empty bottle on the table and your story is not over. I was well into mine when I realized what was happening and that there was no going back. Things went completely crazy. My characters—which I am very fond of, make no mistake about it—began to do whatever they pleased. I'm not joking! It was enough to give them something to drink and let them open their mouths and all my plans would go with the wind. When I complained to him about it, my husband began to worry about me. Eventually I gave up and let them grow freely, hoping I would have enough patience and energy to keep up with them and finish a story. I ended up with the first book of a two-parts novel. Two parts, hopefully. Very little of the original idea is here, in fact I hardly remember where it started. I know where the story is supposed to go, but I'm just as curious as anyone else how it will get there. Strange...

I took inspiration from many sources, some of them very personal. It is fair to note that the imagery and elements of certain parts were influenced by Japanese anime, one of my guilty pleasures. However, the real investment was in the characters, where my interest always lies, be it with a book or a movie. If I do not like them, what happens has little value. To each his own.

But why English, my family kept asking me. Perhaps it was presumptuous of me to think I could carry this off in a foreign language, when I was not even certain I could write a story at all. I blame it on the characters who kept talking to me in English. Fighting that would have been futile. But I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge. Please forgive me if I made mistakes, it was not out of disrespect

for you or the English language, which I am very fond of.

There were many moments when I felt discouraged and wanted to drop this venture entirely. I'm pleased I did not, because all in all it was an amazing journey and I had a lot of fun. Those around me not so much, but that is a different matter.

Thank you, again, for picking it up. I hope you will enjoy reading it.

P.S. There are quite a number of characters. If you have trouble following them, please consult the character list in the Appendix at the end of the book. You will also find all the Eina words and the names of all places listed there.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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CHAPTER ONE

Like cat and dog

The new boy behind the desk was watching him with shy curiosity. He was small and bony, with freckled skin and a ginger mop on top that looked more like a ravaged haystack than human hair. There was a nervousness in the way he moved and kept scratching his nose and ears that made Kiran think of a mouse. *With a rash*, he thought to himself, smiling. He bid the *ginger mouse* goodbye and left the shop.

Outside the sun was shining bright, making his eyes tear and forcing him to blink repeatedly. They had spent the better part of the last two hours in the dim light of the apothecary's private office, a pompous name for a small, musty, windowless room with a desk, three chairs and a few shelves, in which said owner conducted his business. It used to be a storage room which he had converted into an office, because it was the most private. A couple of oil lamps provided all the light, but also a rancid smell that he ingeniously managed to conceal by throwing in some dried aromatic herbs. Business usually did not take so long, but this was one of their most scrupulous clients. Always looking for the best merchandise and willing to pay handsomely, but a terrible nitpick. He asked questions, checked, sniffed and tested every single ingredient, then weighed it two or three times before buying it. *Can't blame the man for being thorough*. Though sometimes Kiran wished he were not so slow and repetitive.

He sighed and stretched, breathing in the smell of dead leaves. The shop's windows overlooked a small square in the best part of the Trade District, surrounded by old buildings with two or three floors and various shops on the ground floor. In the middle was a large plane tree, one of the few in the whole district and the only one in that square. Trees were scarce in Ardaena, where space was limited and, apart from some very old ones, they could only be found in the gardens of the most rich. It was one of the reasons he disliked the city. This particular plane was so old its branches overshadowed half the square. People had built benches around it and it was a popular place, both with passers-by and those who came to take water from the nearby fountain. Kiran sat on one, resting his head on its back, eyes up towards the rusty crown. It was fairly late in the autumn and half of the leaves were covering the dirty cobbles with a brittle,

fragrant blanket. The sunlight was sifting through the holes in the crown and Kiran closed his eyes. The day was unusually warm for that time of the year and the sun on his face felt so good, he dozed off.

"I swear I never met a slower person in my entire life. I could watch mould growing in that place, and feel more entertained."

Kiran startled awake.

"Were you sleeping?" asked Val, sitting next to him.

"Me? Not at all." Then he yawned and stretched like a cat.

"What's next on the list?"

"Shopping."

"That's for tomorrow, before we leave," decided Val. "What about our clients?"

"All done, except for Idris." They were told he was out on business and would return later in the afternoon.

"Really? Talk about efficiency. I guess we deserve a break. Let's grab some food and enjoy the rest of this beautiful day."

Kiran knew what that meant and it had nothing to do with the beauty of the day. He held out a hand.

"What?"

"Give me the money. Do whatever you wish, but the money stays with me."

Val frowned. "Outrageous! Is that how you talk to your father?"

The young man was unmoved.

"Fine, but I'll keep my half," said Val, changing the tone.

"Your half is as good as gone if you keep it."

"You don't trust me."

"Near a bookshop? Never."

"I am deeply saddened." He emphasized that with a hand on his heart.

"And I feel sorry for our poor friends, who will have to carry your books on top of everything else."

"I promise I won't buy more than tw—three." He raised three fingers to reinforce his words. Then another one. "Maybe four, but no more."

Kiran laughed—sometimes Val was incredibly childish. "You are incorrigible. Let's eat, I'm starving."

"Well, we made some good deals today. I'd say that merits a special pie,"

proposed Val.

“Bribing me won’t work.”

“We’ll see about that.”

A few streets further was Sam’s bakery, one of the best reputed in the city. His famous meat pies were so good he was often employed by the nobles for their parties. That also meant they were not cheap. Most commoners could not afford to buy from him, but every now and then he and his father would indulge in a juicy pie, to reward a particularly good day.

From the square to the bakery was a little more than a short walk, but, despite the empty stomachs, they took their time. The streets were busy and people often bumped into each other, which meant it was fairly easy to lose the contents of one’s pockets, especially when looking like a traveller. Street vendors pulling heavy carts were crying their wares and people gathered around them to buy spiced meat pasties, cheese and wafers for lunch. It was difficult to move fast, but eventually they reached the bakery.

The smell of fresh bread and pastries that filled the whole place made their mouths water. The ovens were at the back of the building, but the heat still reached all the way to the front and the girl who served the customers kept wiping the sweat on her face with a cloth. Despite the limited space the baker had managed to cram in a long, narrow wooden table with crude benches on each side for those who wanted to eat inside. There were a few customers, but not as many as they feared, so it was not long before they were sitting at the table with two large meat pies, gold crusted and almost hot. The filling was well spiced and tasty and they kept licking the juices trickling down their fingers, which was one of the reasons why they never bought pies on the streets. It was a messy business, but an absolute delight for the senses.

They ate without speaking, savouring every bite and watching the bustle outside. Finally, pleased and with a full stomach, Val broke the silence.

“Let’s go back, I’d like a word with Ermid.”

“I’m sure you would.”

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want.”

“I don’t mind Ermid. Or the bookshop.”

Val smiled. “If there is somewhere else you’d rather go...”

“Not really. There’s still Idris, though,” reminded him Kiran.

“Ah, yes,” said his father, without enthusiasm.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of that.”

“Thank you.” He patted his stomach with satisfaction. “That was delicious. Shall we proceed?”

Kiran smiled fondly. Val was so simple sometimes, so easy to please. They thanked the girl and made their slow way back to the plane tree square.

It was a two days’ ride from their home village to the capital, which might have seemed a lot, considering they had to make the journey both ways. With another couple of days in the city, the whole trip took, roughly, a week. But they enjoyed travelling and there were certain supplies they needed to buy. Trivial things, such as clothing, household goods, salt and spices, and other food ingredients that did not grow in their parts—*trivial* was a word Val often applied to living necessities, which held no intellectual value for him—as well as chemical tools, paper and ink. A physician and passionate scholar, Val had his own medicine recipes, which he prepared at home. He also preferred to make, rather than buy, their cleaning products. Especially the soap, which was an expensive item, highly valued by the elegant upper class and often disregarded by the rest, for obvious reasons. They picked most ingredients themselves from the woods or during their travels, but there were some chemicals they could only find in the city. The shops and markets of Ardaena were well stocked and Val had a nose for bargaining.

Another arrangement that took them to the city involved a few of the local apothecaries, which they supplied with wild herbs and roots, rare mushrooms and all sorts of odd looking things—usually dead—that would give most people the creeps. Many of those were not easy to come across and required thorough knowledge, some even a fair bit of travelling, so this was a steady business for them.

And finally there were the bookshops, where the fun began. Val loved books more than food and he could never keep out of a bookshop. Which was fine. But—and therein lied the real problem—he seldom left one empty handed. It was not a pecuniary issue, as Kiran had exaggerated when he claimed his father would spend all his earnings on books. In fact he was always careful with

money. Not parsimonious, prudent. And really *prudence* was a word that applied to most of Val's actions and decisions. No, the problem with books was space: there was simply no more of it on the shelves and they lay scattered in every corner of the library, or piled in dangerously hazardous heaps. They had even insinuated themselves in the bedrooms. Cleaning those rooms was turning into an ordeal and, for a while, he had tried to steer his father clear of bookshops. Not with much success, though.

Once, while dusting the bookshelves, Kiran had finally asked him, "Aren't you afraid someone might break in one day, while we are away, and steal your books?"

"And do what with them?"

"Sell them, obviously."

"Perhaps, if we lived in the city. As it is, I think a thief would find the trouble too great for the reward. Not to mention they are all marked with my initials. Don't worry, my books are quite safe."

Can't say the same about me, Kiran had thought morosely when, just a moment later, a stack of books had collapsed, throwing him off balance and onto the hard floor, while they scattered around in cloud of dust. Val had helped him stand and put the books back.

"Try to be more careful, these are fragile objects."

What about me?

"We should ask Alden to build us a few more shelves. Piling the books like this is unsafe, you might get hurt."

"Why, thank you for thinking about my safety," Kiran had replied bitterly.

"What are you saying? You are more important than anything!" Then, looking around, "No wonder this happened, we have too many books."

"And who is responsible for that?"

"Too many books improperly stored, I was going to say."—Kiran had attempted to protest—"Now, now, let's have a cup of tea. We'll sort this out."

That was one of the ways Val ended an argument. But things had continued the same as before and, eventually, Kiran had given up. He just left him to his books, while he took care of other things on the list. Like today, when he agreed to meet Idris, another chemist, by himself. However, there was still some time before that, so he joined his father in the little bookshop across the square from

the apothecary they had left less than two hours before. And not to keep an eye on him, which would have been useless, but to skim through the books himself. He might have grumbled about them, but he was just as fond of reading.

Ermid, the shopkeeper, was busy with some customers, but he greeted them with cordial familiarity, like old acquaintances, motioning them to help themselves. They knew each other for a long time. Val had been a regular since his younger years and seldom left the place without buying something. Their mutual love for books was what had drawn them close. In fact there was a corner at the back of the shop reserved for special customers, which was well stocked with rare or old books, or simply books on subjects that only appealed to the inquisitive minds of some scholars. Val could always find something interesting there, though whence and how he managed to get his hands on them Ermid would not always say and they thought best not to ask. This was not a public library, but they were allowed to sit and read even without buying, rarely as the latter happened. There was a table with two chairs for that purpose, and for Ermid's use when he had a bit of free time to chat with some of the clients, while keeping an eye on the shop. They went straight to it and, soon enough, were so absorbed in reading, they barely noticed the dimming of daylight.

"I should be going," realized Kiran, when the tolling of bells penetrated his thoughts.

"Hm?" Val briefly lifted his nose from the book. "Oh, it's getting late. You should be going."

"Don't wait for Ermid to throw you out."

"Mhm. Just going to stay a bit more. I'll see you at the inn for dinner."

Then he resumed his reading, and Kiran knew he was lost to the world until closing time. So he thanked the shopkeeper for always putting up with his father and went to meet the last client, before it was too late.

It was dark outside when he left Idris's workshop. The deal took half an hour at most, where he sold, among other things, some powdered *snake ivy*—which Idris had expressly asked for the last time they met—and purchased a few salts for some recipes of theirs. That ought to have been it, had Idris been less fond of talking. But he was very much so, and Kiran had to listen to his opinions about

young men who were not what their fathers used to be, and how he disapproved of the use of such *aid* as snake ivy, which was said to do wonders for gentlemen, in the right amounts, but was quite dangerous otherwise.

“In my youth a man needed no help to impress a lady, if you follow me,” said Idris, winking suggestively. “These days young men are so pampered, they lack strength. They do nothing but dawdle about, dress after the latest fashion, drink and throw parties. They forgot how to be real men.” He was obviously talking about nobles. “But business is business and if that is what they ask for, who am I to argue? It is their parents’ duty to educate them, not mine.”

Kiran felt uncomfortable discussing such things with a man of Idris’s age—he was ten years older than Val—so he changed the subject. But the old man did not mind, he could talk about anything as long as someone listened. He was probably the most agreeable of their clients, but where old age seemed to make many people grumpier and tight-lipped, Idris was growing more talkative by the day. Eventually Kiran pointed outside, reminding him politely it was closing time, and he was finally excused.

The meeting had exhausted him and he could not wait to get back to the inn and enjoy a peaceful dinner. Miller’s Inn was not on the best side of the Trade District, but it was clean, decently priced and the food was excellent. The owners were simple, uneducated people, but honest, kind and, most importantly, minded their own business. They always lodged there and, as loyal patrons, enjoyed a few privileges. Such as being given the same room on the top floor, which faced to the back of the inn, towards the waterfront—for it was considerably quieter and better aired and, small though it was, they did not have to share it—whenever it was or became available. Or being served a food they liked and such. Little things which made them feel particularly welcome. Not to mention the attention their horses received. But the inn was across the river that split Ardaena and the Trade District in two, roughly from east to west. And while their clients were on the northern side, where the wealthy traders had their shops, the inn, built by a former miller as the name suggested, was on the southern side, along with all the craftsmen and their workshops. They were called the Upper and Lower Trade, a convention which had more to do with occupation than actual elevation. There were several bridges that connected them and, fortunately, one of them was close to Miller’s Inn. But Kiran still had to walk a

good distance through the Upper Trade before reaching that bridge, and he was growing hungry.

The last shops were closing and the taverns and alehouses were slowly filling with people in need for some gossip and a whole lot of ale. Night was falling rapidly over the city and the shopkeepers were lighting the street lamps, whose flickering flames cast a soft, golden light. There were fewer people on the streets and they were walking fast, many of them disappearing inside the noisy taverns. As he passed by them, laughter, shouts and drunk curses reached his ears, just as the streets were growing more silent. A fiddler playing a jingle was answered by a cacophony of hoarse voices and loud applause, scaring the cats that were feeding on the trash. This was another reason he disliked the city. Sure, at home men were getting drunk too, being noisier than usual, but they seemed to have outgrown the barbaric behaviour in which some of these people indulged.

He hastened his pace and finally reached the bridge, where he stopped and took a deep breath. At night, with the stars turning on one by one, the river looked beautiful. There were no moons that night and the lamps at the foot of the bridge were out, either from lack of oil or because nobody had bothered to light them, but the horizon still had a faint purple tint. The sky was clear and the air smelled of moisture, fish, rotting plants and burnt wood. A gentle breeze was blowing from the east, along the river, not too cold, only chilly enough to prick the skin. And with it, mirroring the stars, moved a swarm of fireflies, dancing in the air like sparks from a bonfire. Or so people might have thought, had they been able to see them. But to anyone's eyes they would have appeared dim, like insects whose wings caught some unseen light. Kiran, however, saw a swarm of glowing creatures, bright specks of starlight, and he stared in silence, dazzled by the beauty of it. Hidden in the stands of reed which padded the river banks, frogs were croaking in a loud, dissonant chorus of mating calls. Arburn at night was one of the few things he enjoyed in Ardaena.

He was so lost in reverie, he heard nothing before he felt the cold blade at his throat.

"Gimme the purse! Gentle, now."

The whisper was husky and smelled of bad alcohol and *black candy*, a narcotic made from a certain mushroom boiled with maple syrup, to hide the bitter taste. It was cheap, easy to prepare and quite effective, though it had

unpleasant effects on breath and teeth over time. The man's left arm was thrown around him, pressing along the collarbone and pulling him backwards. The sleeve smelled as if it had not seen water in weeks.

"Do it!" The stinky whisper became more imperative.

Kiran bit his lip, regretting the moment he had forgotten his surroundings and had let his guard down. He had no intention to give away the money, nor show the salts he had just bought—they were fairly costly and he was sure to lose them.

"Let's not be too hasty," he said, trying to keep his calm. He felt something stirring inside, a presence that was about to wake, and that worried him even more. "Don't wake up, please. Don't!" he murmured to himself, not realizing he had said that aloud.

"What was that?" asked the man in a threatening voice. He shifted behind his back, sniffing him. "Mm, you're not one of 'em hoity-toities, but you sure smell good." He pressed closer, rubbing against his back in a manner which made Kiran shiver with disgust. The free arm slowly moved to the back, groping him through the cloak, while the blade pressed harder against the tender skin of the neck. "Not bad! Looks like tonight I'm lucky. Might as well enjoy meself a little."

The man made a coarse, repulsive sound, resembling a laugh, and the foul smell of his breath twisted Kiran's guts. The sickening feeling roused the presence inside and his hands moved suddenly and swiftly, grabbing the arm at his throat in a tight, painful grip, while his elbow hit square in the stomach. It happened so fast the poor bastard had no time to react. The knife fell from his hand and he dropped to his knees, gasping for air. He cursed horribly and raised to attack with an enraged growl, but Kiran had already turned to face him and he froze, stricken with dread.

"Curse your blood! What are you?"

In the darkness of the night Kiran's eyes were glowing gold, like a cat's, yet not in the same way. They looked more as if a fire were burning in them, radiating from the center and spreading towards the edge of the iris in bright streaks of gold and amber. There was nothing human in them.

Kiran kicked the knife away from him. "Don't you dare follow me!" he hissed. "Say anything about this, to anyone, and I promise you, no matter where

you are, you'll meet a horrible end."

His assailant nodded, paralysed with fear. From the bridge a voice called to them.

"You there! What is going on?" Two sets of footsteps and a wobbly light were approaching fast. "Hey!"

Damn it, thought Kiran displeased. He did not need more trouble. All he wanted was to have a peaceful dinner and go to sleep. "Get lost," he ordered the stunned man. "Now!"

The man recovered from his horror enough to understand he was let go. He bolted towards one of the alleys, tripping on the uneven cobbles that paved the streets, but did not stop to look behind. Kiran took a few deep breaths, trying to compose himself. The two on the bridge were close enough for him to see them better in the flickering light of their lantern. They were young soldiers and one of them ran past him, in an attempt to catch the thief, but lost him in the pitch black of the side streets.

"What happened?" demanded the one who stayed behind, raising the lamp to see his face.

He was an unusually tall man—taller than him—and that stern look and rigid posture put him in charge. He was staring intently, measuring him, and for a moment Kiran imagined he saw a strong emotion passing over that stone face, but it was so brief he paid no attention to it, too busy to hide his own.

"I apologize for the disturbance, sir," he said in the most obliging manner he could muster. "That gentleman appeared to have a problem. I was trying to help, but he ran away the moment you called."

The other one came back, puffing from the exertion.

"Did he assault you?" asked the first man.

"No, sir."

"Did he steal anything from you?"

Kiran patted his belt and pockets. "Not that I can tell, no. I don't think he had that intention."

"Oh, he did," said the other one in a friendlier tone, catching his breath. "You can tell that sort a mile off."

"Is that so?" Kiran's wonder sounded genuine.

Now that he took a closer look, they were no regular soldiers, but royal

guards. Were they patrolling the streets? *Is that even a royal guard's duty?* The one in charge studied him for a while and Kiran felt a sudden urge to leave, as if the man's stare could see behind his lie. Not the one about the assault, his other lie, his secret. Inside him the presence had gone back to sleep, but he feared there might still be a trace of the strange fire, which had scared off that miserable bastard, in his eyes.

"What is that?" asked the guard all of a sudden, startling him. He was pointing below his chin.

Kiran touched his neck and felt a faint cut. The blade had scratched the skin. "I cut myself this morning."

"Cooking?"

"Beg your pardon?"

"How did you cut yourself?"

"With a kitchen knife, yes. Too much zeal, I suppose." *Think you're so clever, Grim-face.* The man's sarcasm sent the blood rushing to his cheeks, but he hoped they will not notice that in the poor light of the lantern. At least his voice did not betray him.

"Pfff!" the friendly guard stifled his laugh. "Sorry, Captain, that was amusing."

Grim-face ignored him, his eyes still on Kiran. "Where are you going at this hour?"

"Hopefully to have dinner, if I can still find any." That one was beginning to annoy him, so he felt no compulsion to be more explicit. Apparently the feeling was mutual, however the man possessed remarkable self-control.

"Where would that be?"

"The Miller's Inn. Gentlemen, I apologize if I caused any trouble, but I have a friend waiting for me at the inn and it would be very uncivil of me to be late. Which, by the way, I already am. So if there is nothing else..."

"Very well," said *Grim-face*, "we shall escort you."

Kiran made a slight bow, to conceal a wince of displeasure. "That shall not be necessary, the inn is right on the other side. I assure you I shall not stray from the *right path*."

"It is for your protection."

"I appreciate that, but I'm certain no one is waiting under the bridge. I

imagine the water is too cold.”

The friendly guard could not hold his laughter anymore. “You are unbelievable!” he said, patting him on the shoulder.

Under regular circumstances the familiar gesture would have annoyed Kiran, but he liked this man. Possibly because he disliked the other too much. The Captain seemed to be losing his patience with both of them and Kiran fought back a smile. It was obvious the man did not trust him and he suspected the escort offer was to keep an eye on him rather than for protection. But he had no argument to enforce that offer, other than being, by the nature of his occupation, a hand of the law. And since there was no proof of unlawful behaviour, he was going to have to give up. Which he did, however unsatisfying for him, because he was not stupid, apparently.

“Be careful. The streets are not safe at night.” *Grim-face* made a stiff bow, just a slight incline of the head, and left.

“Stay out of trouble,” said the other one, with a wink and a wave of hand, and then followed his superior.

Kiran sighed with relief and suddenly realized it really was late and he was very, very hungry.

Val was waiting for him at the inn, watching the door with increasing apprehension. Their dinner was sitting on the table, cold, but untouched.

“Where have you been?” he met his son with impatience and concern.

“I’m sorry for worrying you, Val. I was delayed.”

On his way to the inn Kiran had decided not to mention his little misadventure. At least until they were back home. He had cleaned his neck, just to be sure, and the fine cut looked like any other fresh scratch. Hopefully his father would not pay attention to it. He rarely lied to him, and only by omission, but being partially to blame for the incident and still annoyed by its development, he much rather preferred not to distress him, nor to sit through one of his lectures.

“Oh, Fates!” said Val, slapping his forehead. “I forgot what a blabber good old Idris is.”

“You have no idea. I swear the older that man grows, the more he rambles. We should have him on top of the list from now on, that way we could use the

rest of it as an excuse to leave his shop.”

Val laughed at the idea, but agreed it was not bad. “The food went cold.”

“Perhaps I could persuade Maire to heat it a little,” said Kiran, standing. He went to the kitchen door and had a short talk with the innkeeper’s wife, then returned to the table.

The woman came to take their bowls. “I’ll bring you some more bread,” she said, obliging.

“You’re very kind, Maire, but this one is just fine. Thank you.”

A few minutes later they were savouring her amazing smoked pork stew, while Kiran amused his father with the embarrassing conversation he had with Idris, doing quite a good impression of the old man’s mannerisms. Val did not seem to notice any change in his disposition and that, at last, made him relax.

“Arburn is stunning at night,” said Kiran when they were done eating, sipping from his hot, flavoured tea. He lowered his voice, “I saw a swarm of *fuuri*.”

Val threw a cautious look around. The inn was crowded, but people were chattering and drinking, though the place was not nearly as noisy as a tavern. No one was paying attention to them.

“Really? I thought they lived in woods.”

“Not necessarily. As long as there’s food...”

“Ah, the river,” realized Val. “The weather today was unusually warm for the season, there must be a lot of moisture in the air.”

“They probably followed it. But it is mostly in woodlands that you would find them. It’s almost as if they have a fondness for those, if that were possible.”

“Only they don’t have likes and dislikes.”

“No, they are mindless creatures. They just feed. I suppose you could call it an instinct.”

“I wish I could see them the way you do,” said Val. For a man with his mind it would have been extraordinary. A wealth of knowledge, hidden from his eyes.

“You already see more than any other man, because you know what to look for,” said Kiran, covering Val’s hand with his own in an affectionate and comforting gesture. “Your knowledge is closest to that of the *Eina*. True, theirs is far deeper, but even they cannot see more than what is apparent.”

“I know, I know...” He stared absently at the honey-coloured liquid in his

cup, thinking, then spoke with a playful glint in his eyes. "I found an interesting book today. It talks about the Eina. The author seems to have spent some time in the eastern lands."

After a moment's pause, his son gave him an incredulous look. "You bought your own book?"

"Not *bought*. But I was curious," replied Val with the tone of a child caught doing something bad.

"What, to see what it says? You wrote it, you have the manuscript! *And* a copy."

"Tsk! To see how it was translated. This is not one of Ermid's copies, he bought it from a traveller from Vessar. Sometimes scholars inadvertently alter meanings in the translation process. And I don't see a problem in wanting to have a foreign copy."

Kiran's first impulse was to scold him, but he remembered his own careless mistake. He had not even had the courage to tell Val about it, how could he be annoyed at him for openly admitting to have given in to a whim? Perhaps not quite a whim, for he had a good argument about translations, but even without that it was not really a problem. *I am such a nag sometimes*, he realized, ashamed. "Well? What do you think of it?"

"I didn't have the chance to take a proper look. It's nicely made, though perhaps a little too embellished for my taste." He chuckled. "You should have seen Ermid's face when he gave it to me—smiling from ear to ear."

"So it was a gift?"

"Did I not say so? Although I insisted to pay for it, but he would not hear of that. He said he bought it for a good price, together with half a dozen others."

"I'm surprised he didn't wish to keep it."

"He has his own copy. And he's not fluent enough in Vessari. Well, I'm not that much of a master, either, but I'm pleased all the same... My book has reached farther places than I would have expected." Val was always modest about his achievements, but it was obvious he was contented.

"I can't wait to see it," said Kiran with a fond smile, to his father's great pleasure. "What else did you find?"

"A travel journal about the western lands. From the little bits I read, it describes many of the local customs and beliefs."

“Mm, that sounds interesting.”

“Yes. And it's by no means a flimsy book. I also bought one on farming. It seems well written, with detailed explanations and arguments.”

“Farming? Since when does it interest you?”

“It doesn't hurt to know a little about it. I don't expect to travel all my life. Farming may sound easy because many live off of it, but there are rules about working the land and the plants have their own particularities.”

“But you know a lot about plants.”

“Wild plants, forests, yes. This and that are different things. We never owned a proper vegetable garden, for example. We don't spend enough time at home to care for it. Farming requires constant work, because each crop has its own cycle and needs.”

Whenever Val was interested in a new subject, his approach was methodical. He did not believe in doing things by ear. *‘Each effect has a cause, therefore you must know how to create the right conditions, in order to obtain the desired result.’* Improvisation was always a last resort, when circumstances were poor or unfavourable, but things needed to be done nonetheless. *‘No matter how arbitrary it looks, everything has a rule. You just have to find it,’* he always said.

He emptied his cup and rose. “It's late, we should retreat. I want to read a little before going to sleep and tomorrow we must start early. By noon we should be well on the road.”

Kiran had already finished his tea. They bid the innkeepers good night and went to their room on the top floor, facing north, towards the river.

CHAPTER TWO

Foreboding

A long, deep sound resonated through the air, tolling the noon. Bredan dropped on the stone bench with a dull thud and wiped his sweaty face with a cloth. The padded vest was unbearably warm and he unlaced it with trembling fingers. He was exhausted. They had been fencing for the last couple of hours without a break and Bran had fought as if they were enemies. More than once he had caught him open and had taken advantage, merciless, striking harder than usual. His stern friend was stronger than him and knew his weaknesses. That day he had seemed determined to exploit all of them.

The weather was cold, unlike the week before, but that was normal for the season. A bright haze surrounded the sun, barely visible above the clouds, and the light had a depressing, grey hue. The crisp autumn breeze was ruffling their hair and shirts, drying the sweat and prickling the skin, but, since they were heated from the exercise, the sensation was invigorating.

Bredan rubbed a sore spot on his side. "You didn't have to hit so hard," he said bitterly.

"You leave too many openings," grumbled Bran, sitting. He had been ill-tempered and insufferable all morning and the other soldiers had been clever enough to keep their distance.

"What is wrong with you today? Nay, the whole week!"

Bran seemed to mull over the question, but made no answer.

"Fine, go ahead and sulk. I'm too tired for this." Bredan stood up to leave, but a thought stroke him. "Does it have anything to do with that evening?"

"Not here."

"What?"

"I don't want to talk about that here. Let's go somewhere quiet."

"I need a drink, you made me sweat like a horse."

Bran thought for a moment and opened his mouth to speak, but he saw a soldier coming towards them and changed his mind.

"Captain, Senral Keer wants to see you."

"Where is he?"

"His workroom, sir."

“Tell him I’ll be right there.”

“Yes sir.” The soldier saluted and turned around, on his way greeting another group that was training.

“The Bog and Barrel,” said Bran hurriedly, fastening his gambeson and grabbing the sword. “I’ll see you there in two hours.” He left the training ward with long strides. The Senral disliked to be kept waiting.

Bog and Barrel was a small tavern on the southern bank of Arburn, in the Lower Trade, hidden among the wood workshops. It was a decent enough place, not very crowded during the day, and the ale was good. The owner had a barrels workshop and ties among breweries, so his was not as watered down as that sold in many places from the Lower Trade. Bredan had known it for a long time and it was one of their favourite places when they wanted a drink and privacy from their comrades or curious eyes. The taverns in the Upper Trade were fancier, but they also had more ears.

Inside a couple of customers were discussing trades, but most tables were empty. Since it was well past noon, people had finished their lunch break and had gone back to work. The owner was in his workshop, next door; he had left the place in the care of his girls, as he always did until evening. Bredan picked a corner table, near the window, and waved one of them. She came to him beaming.

“Greetings, my lord!” she said with a curtsy.

“Greetings, fair lady,” bowed Bredan and she giggled with pleasure at that. Bredan was a ladies’ man and the formality was just a game, for they were well acquainted, but she still blushed every time he called her *fair*. Not that she was a bad looking lass.

“You have not graced us with your presence in a while,” she complained. She had learned the fancy speech of the Upper Trade and delighted in using it when given the chance. Which happened not very often in that part of the city.

“My apologies. Unfortunately duty comes first.”

“In that case I forgive you. Would you like to eat?”

“Is there anything left?”

“I’m sure I can find something for *you*,” she flirted with a skittish smile.

“Some smoked fish, maybe? Cheese?”

“Fish sounds good, thank you. And the usual drinks.”

She looked around, then outside. “Where’s your handsome friend?”

“He’ll be here shortly—what do you mean, handsome? What about me?”

“Two servings, then,” she said, pretending to ignore the question, but the flushed cheeks spoke in her stead. She went behind the bar and returned shortly thereafter, carrying two pints. “This just came in this morning,” she said when she set them on the table.

“Thank you, my lady.”

The doorbell chimed and Bran let himself in.

“Good day, Captain,” she greeted him, but this time it was customary politeness, not playfulness. She had seen Bran many times and thought very well of him, but his aloofness was a little intimidating and she dared not behave in the casual manner which Bredan’s easiness encouraged. That day, more than usually, Bran had a grim air about himself.

“Good day, miss.” His expression softened a bit and he managed a faint smile.

Bredan had told him, on numerous occasions, that no matter his own problems, he should not punish the people who have no fault in them with disagreeable manners. Especially those who always treated him with kindness and respect. It reminded him of his mother’s teachings and he made efforts to follow that. The girl smiled back, understanding, and left them alone.

“I took the liberty to order some smoked fish. We have not eaten anything.”

“Mhm.”

“What’s with that face?” asked Bredan, after Bran took his seat.

“We’re going on a mission.”

“Brilliant! I was growing bored.”—Bran frowned, clearly displeased—“Oh, spare me the lecture. You need a change of pace, too.”

“Perhaps.”

Bredan raised his mug. “To adventure. And a smooth mission,” he added, in answer to his friend’s grimace. “Cheers!”

“Cheers.”

The ale was not bad at all.

“So, when do we leave?”

"Tomorrow, if everything is ready. We will escort an embassy to Astur, to discuss some new commercial treaties."

"Isn't that the Master of Trade's province? Why send us?"

"Because His Highness Prince Feolan is joining the party."

"Oh! Who are the others?"

"The Master of Trade and the Lord Chancellor of Affairs."

Bredan whistled. "That's quite the assembly."

"It is," agreed Bran.

The girl returned with the food, placing before them a plate with smoked bass, two wooden trenchers—worn and stained from use, but fairly clean—and a few loaves of brown bread. She also brought some hard cheese and sliced apples—"From the house"—and two old forks. "Thought you might want these," she said with a smile, before retreating. Folk usually ate the fish with their hands, but Bredan detested the smell which persisted on his fingers hours after eating.

"Thank you, darling, that's very kind of you," he answered for both of them.

They ate in silence for a while. Bran was nibbling at the food absently, his mind elsewhere, but Bredan was hungry. The morning exercise had left him without strength.

"So why the gloom?"

"I have an unpleasant feeling about this."

"Why? We've done this before."

"Father was anxious, I could tell that. He has not told me everything. That alone is odd," explained Bran. He was a straightforward man, a trait he had inherited from the Senral. No wonder he was concerned. "And, as you noticed, such an honourable assembly just to negotiate trading treaties seems a bit excessive."

Prince Feolan was the King's second son. His brother, First Prince Aydan, was heir to the throne, but the Second Prince was just as involved in the country's affairs as the first. He was intelligent and a talented diplomat. They had met him in person, but only because he liked to fence with the guards every once in a while. In his mid thirties and surprisingly unassuming, he seemed to appreciate their company, often times debating on political or military subjects after the training sessions. On the former he was vastly superior, but claimed their opinions, uncorrupted by court interests, sometimes offered him a fresh

perspective.

"You suspect a sensitive matter?"

Bran nodded, stabbing the fish with the fork. "We will learn more this evening, I hope."

"Then stop worrying for the time being. You butchered that poor fish."

Bredan pushed away his trencher and picked a slice of apple. "But in that case," he mused, "I wonder that they wanted us for the mission."

"Do you feel unprepared?"

"Oh, now you're suddenly confident!"

"It was not us I was concerned about."

"Well, you know what I meant. If you are right, isn't it reasonable to assume they would choose men with more experience?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if we were the youngest."

"You see my problem, then."

"It was His Highness's request that we be part of the escort. I suspect it's one of the reasons Father is anxious."

That was an unexpected honour and Bredan froze with a piece of cheese half-hanging out of his mouth, eyes wide with astonishment. He was lost for words and looked so silly that Bran choked on his food.

"I never would have thought something could shut you up!" he managed to say between chuckles and coughs, pushing his own trencher away and drinking to stop the fit.

It was the first time he laughed that day, strained and short as it was, but it brought to Bredan's mind their talk in the training ward. Was Bran still willing to say what had bothered him the whole week or would he keep it to himself, he wondered.

"Tsk! You caught me off guard," he said, after swallowing the cheese. "Any idea why he chose us?" Better not jump to the other subject too soon. He had learned patience and diplomacy were the only ways to make his friend talk.

"I'd rather not speculate. Father is expecting us at sunset. There will be a meeting in his workroom, I'm sure we'll learn the answer."

"That leaves us a few more hours," concluded Bredan. He waved the girl at the bar for two more drinks.

"We must be sober," warned him Bran.

“Absolutely! But who knows how long this mission will take? This may be our last peaceful day for a while. Let me at least enjoy another pint.”

“I thought you missed a bit of excitement.”

“I did. I do. But it’s a good excuse,” he said with a smirk.

They were silent while the girl brought them the drinks and cleaned the table, moving quickly and without a word. Her face was smiling, but apparently she knew when to talk and when to be quiet. *Good girl*, thought Bredan, thanking her with a nod and a grateful look.

“What do you think about that man?” Bran asked abruptly, when they were alone again. “You wanted to know about my mood.”

“So it is about that. I told you I liked him, he was witty.”

“I disagree, but never mind me. I want to know what *you* make of him.”

“I’m surprised we are having this conversation a full week after the event.”

“Indulge me.”

“All right.” Bredan paused for a gulp of ale, thinking. “Not a high born, but well educated. His bearing and manners were fine and naturally pleasing.”

“Pleasing? He was patronising us!”

“Arguable. Your opinion is very subjective.”

“Very well then, go on.”

“He was articulate and clever with the words; I liked his sense of humour.”—His friend scoffed—“You wanted *my* impression.”

“Yes.”

“Daring.”

“Impertinent,” echoed Bran.

“Not from Ardaena, I daresay. There was something in his speech.”

“An accent?”

“Not quite. Something about the quality of his voice, though I cannot say what.”

Bran’s thoughts went back to that evening, but all he could recall was that insolent tone which had grated on his nerves.

“Quite good looking,” went on his friend.

“Irrelevant.”

“Very young... Come to think of it, he was rather outstanding! One rarely finds such qualities in a person so young.”

“Yes, he certainly reminds me of someone.”

“I have no idea whom you mean,” said Bredan, “but thank you.”

Bran sniffed. “Since you took the time to admire his looks, did you also notice there was not a trace of hair on his face? Not as though he were freshly shaved, but rather like a woman’s cheek.”

“Heh, that’s what the *cooking* comment was all about. But now that you mention it, yes... Wouldn’t that make him just a boy?”

“Then he would be the tallest *boy* I’ve ever seen. Even I was shorter at sixteen.” Since adolescence, Bran had been taller than the boys his age.

“No, no, he was older. Five or six years your junior, perhaps.”

“It doesn’t matter. What else?”

“Hmm... he was a tad slippery.”

“It takes one to know one.”

Bredan pouted. “That was unnecessary.”

“I don’t mind *a tad slippery*, obviously,” said Bran, “but that man was lying through his teeth. That cut on his neck was fresh. We came to his aid, what reason was there to lie about it?”

“You think he was assaulted with a knife... Perhaps he was embarrassed. He seemed the proud sort, who would not admit he needed help, especially when the robbery failed. I’m certain he told the truth about that.”

“Proud or not, anyone in his place would have been relieved, but he was exactly the opposite. He dismissed us. Why was he so anxious to get rid of us?”

“I think you’re reading too much into it. You took offence at his behaviour.”

“It’s not just that.” Bran’s lips pressed together, as they always did when he wished to seal his thoughts, which only roused his friend’s interest more. At last he made up his mind. “Tell me, did you—” He paused again, searching for the right words. “Did you *feel* something about him?”

At this point, usually, Bredan would have made a joke, but Bran was too serious. “I don’t understand.”

“When I first lifted the lamp to his face, I felt... I don’t know... something terrible.” He fidgeted on the bench.

“Just say it!”

“Fear,” finally blurted out Bran, colouring slightly. “I had a horrible feeling of fear when I looked into his eyes. Just for a moment. But it was very strong.”

He was a little embarrassed for admitting it, but, more than that, he was concerned. Fear was an emotion he was not accustomed with.

Bredan chose his tone with care. "I didn't sense anything strange... There was clearly some tension, he was nervous—in such cases one would simply attribute it to hurt pride or embarrassment—but I felt no threat from him. I'm not saying he was honest, though."

"It was brief, I don't think I would have paid much attention to it, were it not so intense. You know me, Bredan, I'm not easily shaken. But that..." he waved a hand towards an imaginary thing, "it was like a... surge of terrible power that washed through me. My heart almost stopped. I swear I never felt anything like it before. It was... unreal."

"Perhaps *it was*?" tried his friend, but Bran shot him such a disapproving look, he reconsidered. "Of course not, you're too rational for that."

The tavern was quiet, the earlier customers had left long ago and the girls were busying themselves behind the counter and in the back room. Outside people went about their businesses, talking loudly. The noise from the workshops filled the street: axes chopping wood, saws, chisels, planes and, above all that, the steady, resonant banging of hammers.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you imagined everything."

"Do you remember that terrified cry?"

"Just before you called to them, yes. What of it?"

"I'm willing to bet it was the bastard's."

"You think he felt the same thing you did?"

"I think he saw something I didn't."

Bredan shuddered, but then he realized. "That, um, strange moment, was it before I came back?"

"Right in the beginning, yes."

"That explains why I felt nothing. No wonder you were not yourself since then," he muttered in his mug.

"I have no desire to meet him again—"

"You truly dislike him." Bredan could not help a smile.

"—But that moment keeps coming back and I've had no peace of mind since then. I must find out what happened."

"I cannot see how. We have no idea who he is, no name, nothing. It's been a

week, as far as we know he might have left Ardaena. He could be anywhere. Let it go.”

Bran emptied his mug in one gulp. *Let it go.* Easier said than done. But then his face brightened. “The Miller’s Inn! Didn’t he mention he was staying there?”

“Going there for dinner, at least. Did you look into it?”

“No, I just remembered.” His brief enthusiasm vanished. “How could I have forgotten?”

“We don’t have time before we leave. Let’s hope the innkeeper will remember something when we come back.”

Bran was disappointed and that made him surly again. But not as much as before. Finally letting out what had gnawed at him for a whole week made him feel better, as if a darkness had lifted from his heart. He could breathe easier.

“Finish your drink and let’s go. It don’t want to be late.”

They paid and thanked the girls again and Bredan promised to visit them more often. Then, with a relaxed step, they walked towards the bridge and back to the Garrison.

The light coming from the window gilded the room, softening its bleak appearance. The wind, which had blown all day, had scattered the grey clouds and the western sky was burning with shades of gold and red. Bran watched it, lost in thoughts. Across the city, the bells were tolling the sixth hour of the afternoon. The sound of the door startled him.

“Took you long enough.” He turned to Bredan, who discarded the clothes he had worn earlier in a corner. There was a fresh smell of soap coming from him. “We’re not going to the ladies.”

“It doesn’t mean I have to stink,” retorted Bredan.

He was always more fastidious than others about his appearance, a habit he had from home, most likely. Bran liked to pick on him for that—a sort of revenge for constantly being teased himself.

Bredan came closer and sniffed him, which made him draw back, revolted. “You washed too,” he said with a silly grin.

“Of course I did!” said Bran. “But I don’t need a whole day for that.” He walked towards the door. “Stop fooling around, the Senral is waiting for us.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” mocked Bredan, following him.

The officers of the Royal Guard did not bunk in the Garrison with the soldiers, with a few exceptions. Bran was one of them. But they had work rooms and this meeting was set in the private office of Senral Keer, in the north wing. The two men stopped in front of a heavy wooden door. It was so old that its natural colour had faded into a dull, grayish shade of brown, but the wood was still solid. It had no ornaments other than the iron hinges and handle, which had been wrought—by an overzealous smith with artistic ambitions—into intricate shapes resembling vegetation. Bran took a deep breath.

“Nervous?” teased him Bredan.

In answer he knocked: three short, loud raps.

“Come in!” they heard the Senral’s deep voice.

The room was not very large and, like all rooms in the Garrison, had an austere look. One of the walls was shelved from floor to ceiling and was filled with books and scrolls. Besides those, there was only a plain desk and a round table with six chairs, three of which were occupied by Senral Keer, head of the Royal Guards, High-Senral Baran of the Laeden Army and High-Captain Pryce, Bran’s superior. The air was heavy, and not just from the thick smell of oil and old paper. The men around the table had fallen silent at their arrival and were studying them with grave, scrutinizing eyes. They made their formal salutes. Another person was standing by one of the tall windows, and when he turned to face them, Bran and Bredan dropped on one knee and bowed.

“Your Highness!” they said with surprise.

Prince Feolan came to the table, motioning them to stand up. The stubble, the hollow cheeks and the shadows under the sunken eyes betrayed the late hours spent at candle light, but those dark eyes were as lively as always. They had heard he was a tireless man, seldom taking a break from the kingdom’s affairs. His Highness pointed towards the free chairs, but they waited for him to take his place before sitting.

“Now everybody is here,” said the prince. “Senral Baran, these are the men I told you about: Captain Bran Keer and his Second, Bredan Fionn.”

That detail impressed Bredan, he had not expected that His Highness would remember his full name.

The High-Senral nodded in silence, but his brow quirked at hearing Bran’s

name, so the prince explained, “Captain Keer is the son of Senral Keer. Captain Pryce, I believe you know these men.”—Their superior nodded as well —“Perfect! Now that all introductions were made, let’s get to the pressing matters. Senral Keer?”

Bran’s father was much older than one would have expected, but only his grizzled hair, the furrowed brow and the deep folds running from the prominent nose to the corners of the trimmed beard attested to his true age. He was tall like his son, but broader, and his features were strong and less pleasant. Bran had inherited his mother’s looks and his father’s temperament and impressive height. The Senral had the same severe air, but his build and hard face made him look even more intimidating. *No wonder he is so serious, with such a father*, thought Bredan.

“In the past few weeks we have received intriguing news from our ears in Astur. They noticed some activity that could indicate—but this is only our speculation—that King Arne is preparing for something. We fear he might have war in mind. If, why and with whom is impossible to guess at this moment, and we are still collecting intelligence. For now the activity is discreet and seems limited to a few places, nonetheless it raised our concern.”

“Our relationship with Astur has been good,” stepped in High-Senral Baran, with a pleasant, velvety voice. “Perhaps not as close as that with Vessar or Terras, but we do have trading agreements. The commerce between our countries has steadily increased over the last decades. Though our history is no stranger to conflicts, there have not been any major ones in the last generations. The defunct King Frode was a wise and sensible man, if not very open. But his son has a different mind.” High-Senral Baran was older than Bran’s father, but did not possess the same impressive air. His bearing was less rigid and more elegant, in fact without his uniform one would have taken him for a gentle, respectable grandfather, rather than a military man. He was reputed to have a brilliant mind.

“I know I asked this before, but would it be unreasonable to assume your men could have misunderstood what they saw and given a threatening meaning to what is, possibly, harmless activity?”

“It is unlikely, Your Highness, those men are not novices.” Everyone knew Senral Keer was very scrupulous and demanding, and those assigned with

gathering information had to be approved by him, personally. He answered for them. "But Astur is different, so we are taking into account the possibility. We must learn more. It might turn out we worried for naught. I hope it will, but I would rather err on the side of caution, then be right too late. However, we must be careful that our concerns are not apparent, lest we be the ones to give offence and stir a conflict."

"Of course," agreed Prince Feolan.

His manner was informal in that it did not reflect his royal status, nor did it claim the customary deference. Rather it indicated his respect for those older and wiser than him, and his goodwill towards the younger ones.

"High-Senral Baran is right," continued Senral Keer, "King Arne is not like his father. He is more reserved and distrustful, it is hard to tell what he thinks. And even harder for our men to get close without raising suspicions. He is reserved, but not unintelligent. We want him to let us in, and what better opportunity for that than a renewal of our treaties?"

"And a friendly visit from a royal member," added the prince with a self-satisfied smile.

"Well, yes," said the Senral, but it was clear the idea did not please him.

Bran and Bredan were listening in silence—a little overwhelmed, both by the sensitivity of the subject and by sitting in such company—as was High-Captain Pryce, one of the Senral's most trusted captains, whose presence had probably been requested with regards to the escort. Planning the mission was the responsibility of wiser minds, although why the two of them had been chosen to take part in it was not clear yet.

Prince Feolan finally turned to them. "The party will consist of three people: the Master of Trade, the Lord Chancellor of Affairs and myself. There will be a handful of attendants and domestics, just the minimal number necessary for the trip. I don't want a large company. The guards will also be kept to a minimum."

"Your Highness," said Senral Keer, "forgive me, but I cannot consent to that. It's dangerous! We should add more people."

"Why? This is a diplomatic visit. Besides, the purpose is to discuss commercial agreements, not political ones. We should have no reason to expect danger or hostility and King Arne would not expect us to bring a large escort. Doing so would only raise suspicions. We must not suggest him, in any way,

that our presence has other reasons, or that we know anything we should not. Is this not what you said earlier?"

"Your Highness, I must agree with Senral Keer," said High-Senral Baran. "King Arne has a reputation of being unpredictable. We cannot take any chances."

"The whole mission bears a risk, but we have no choice." Prince Feolan pointed a hand to Bran's father, "And it was you who came up with the idea."

"Of the mission, yes, but Your Highness was not supposed to be part of it."

"My presence will reinforce the message of friendship. And, anyway," added the prince, leaning back in his chair, "Father has already consented."

"The King has consented on the condition that we do not take unnecessary risks. Having a proper escort is part of it."

"Which is why High-Captain Pryce is here. We shall have a proper escort—small, but made up of the best men, under his direct command. Captain, I hope you have taken care of that." The prince was as stubborn as a mule and, once he had made a decision, no one but the King had a chance to convince him otherwise.

"We have twenty men, Your Highness, all experienced," said High-Captain Pryce. "Very good fighters, both with a blade and bare handed. I carefully selected them with Senral Keer. They have been informed and will be ready anytime. I also have a few other in mind, should Your Highness reconsider their number. Of course," he added, "none of them were told the real purpose of the journey."

"And that brings me to you," turned the prince to Bran and Bredan. "I want you to be part of the escort, but only for the sake of appearance, because your task is different. I want you to gather intelligence. It is my understanding both of you speak Asturan." He paused, waiting for confirmation—they nodded—and then continued, "As my personal guards you will have access almost everywhere I go, but not as many eyes on you."

They bowed. "Yes, Your Highness."

Inwardly, Bredan was jubilating; the mission was promising to be more exciting than he had anticipated. However, he could not show it in front of this assembly. "Your Highness, am I permitted a question?"

"Certainly. There is no need to concern yourselves with ranks tonight. I

welcome any question which pertains to our mission and any suggestion which might help us.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” he said, with a bob of the head. “Is there anything in particular that we ought to be aware of? Any specifics about the activities Senral Keer has spoken of? If we know what to look for, we shall be more efficient.”

“The reports suggest an increase in the mining activity, in particular iron mining. It may seem irrelevant—indeed, it could be just something temporary—but so far nothing suggests a similarly growing need in the domestic use.”

“Perhaps it is intended for trade?”

“We thought so as well,” said Senral Keer, “but there have been no significant changes in the trade, as far as we can tell. However, there have been sightings of small transports of iron bars from Fargos.” Astur’s southern neighbour, that is.

“Is that unusual?” Bredan was not very knowledgeable about the economy of their neighbours.

“Since they have the means to extract the metal themselves, it is,” answered the Senral.

“Not to mention more expensive,” added the prince.

“You suspect they are gathering iron for weapons,” realized Bran.

“It is a reasonable explanation. But there could be others, perhaps more harmless, that we are not aware of. That is why we must learn more.”

“If so, should there not be an increase in the production of charcoal? And the use of wood?”

“Absolutely,” said the prince. “Bloomeries need it to smelt the metal. But they can also use water. The reports do not mention anything, but it is quite possible that we are witnessing the early stages of preparations. It doesn’t mean it cannot happen in the future. Just as it doesn’t mean that, should this mission invalidate our worries, we will not continue to keep an eye on our neighbours.”

Silence fell on the room, as if the prince and their superiors wanted to let the news sink in. Prince Feolan was the one who broke it.

“You probably wonder why I chose you for this, when we have more experienced men.” It was a rhetorical observation. He knew they were, though their superiors seemed just as curious about his reasons. “I like you,” he said,

smiling candidly at Senral Keer's indignant frown, "you have inquisitive minds. You are observant and quick to understand. You are also young and good looking—not your merit, of course, but it's always a good addition; it opens doors more easily." He turned to the two senrals. "I know you think they are too inexperienced—many said the same about me—but with youth also comes resourcefulness. I believe that is a valuable quality."

Senral Keer sighed with resignation. He had no arguments against his Prince, none, anyway, which could stand against the other's stubbornness, and that seemed to amuse High-Senral Baran.

Prince Feolan was pleased. "You have a charming tongue," he told Bredan, "I happened to hear it in the training ward. And a gift with people. Use them!" He looked at Bran. "You have a subtle eye for details and a sharp mind. We need that. We need your best qualities. I chose you not on a whim, but because I noticed you and I trust my own judgement. And, despite his scowl, I'm sure Senral Keer agrees with me."

Bran's father did not answer, but to those who knew him, and everyone at that table did, his expression was a confirmation.

"Now you know what information we have, but I want you to keep your eyes open to everything," concluded the prince.

"Thank you, Your Highness."

"We still have time to talk about it before we reach Astur. High-Captain Pryce will join us and you will report to me and him. No one else. Mind you! *Nobody*," he stressed the word with a tap on the table, "besides the King and the First Prince, knows what we discussed here tonight. Not even our honourable companions. The Master of Trade is convinced renewing the treaties was his idea. In part, it was. We should not change that, so don't let your tongues slip."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Very well. You may go now, we need you fresh and ready tomorrow. Captain Pryce, if there is nothing else, you can retreat as well."

"Your Highness, you need rest, too," said the Captain. "You have not slept enough in the last days."

"Thank you, Captain, I appreciate your concern. I must discuss a few more details with the senrals, but I shall."

The three of them stood up, saluted the prince, the senrals, and took their

leave. High-Captain Pryce went to his own work room, but Bran and Bredan paused in front of the door, not really knowing what to do. They should have gone to their room to prepare for the next day, to sleep, only they were too agitated to do any of those. They needed a walk, fresh air to clear their minds and steady the fast beating of their hearts. Without even talking to each other, they started in the opposite direction of their room.

The heavy door of the office opened and closed.

“Captain!”

Senral Keer’s deep voice stopped them short. He had followed them outside and was approaching with a decided step and a hard look.

“Senral.”

“Whatever His Highness asks of you, remember that your duty is to the Royal House. If anything happens—anything!—His Highness is your first priority.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m talking to both of you.” He turned a fierce look to Bredan.

“Yes sir!” he answered firmly. The Senral’s gaze sent shivers through his spine.

“Good.” Senral Keer turned to go back to his meeting, but stopped before the door. “And, Bran, tomorrow morning pay a visit to your mother.”

“Will there be enough time?”

“I don’t think you will leave too early.”

“Then I will.”

“...You should come home more often.”

“Yes, Father.”

“Be careful,” said his father in a softer voice, just before going in, as though he did not really wish to be heard.

Bredan thought there was a faint tremble in it. He let out a long breath of relief. “What was *that*?”

“His heart,” answered Bran with fondness, and the corners of his mouth raised ever so slightly, leaving his friend confused and speechless for the second time in a day.

* * *

The tavern keeper dropped the pints on the table a little louder than usual. He liked neither the two strangers who looked like lower class, though their skin was too healthy and smooth for it, nor the dirty beggar in front of them, whose smell was nauseating, but he liked the sound of coins in his pouch. "Make it quick," he grumbled and left. Good thing there were not too many customers, but soon there would be. That stinker better be gone by then.

The dirty man grabbed the pint and greedily gulped half of it, smacking his lips. "I haven't got one in days," he mumbled to himself. "So, whaddya want? To twit me like the rest of 'em?" He spat on the floor. "Blister their foul tongues."

"We want to hear what happened that evening," said one of the strangers in a surprisingly soft voice for such a stern looking fellow.

The beggar snorted. "Aye, hear the blabbering of a Fates rejected wretch." He took another gulp of ale. "It cursed me, that happened. Said it would find me if I told anyone, said I'd meet a horrible end. And look at me!" He opened his arms. "Gone to the dogs. I was not much before, but I was no beggar. Oh, no, I ain't talking about it."

"It?"

"That... thing."

"Tell us what you saw and you shall have decent food till summer."

The man eyed the strangers with suspicion, but at the sight of a small pouch in the hand of the one with a soft voice, his stomach growled. He reached for it, but the other put it back in his cloak.

"It shall be yours if you talk."

"You won't believe me anyways," mumbled the beggar. "Just like they didn't. But I know what I saw and they can all go screw 'emselves."

"What did you see?"

The two men's faces were as readable as two stones on the side of the road, but at least they appeared to take him seriously. What was there to lose? His life? He had barely made it through the last months, but the winter was not over yet. He could die of hunger or cold any day. The beggar closed his eyes. "Oh, what I saw was no man, I'm telling you. Don't know what it was, but no man."

“Why do you think that?”

“Never seen eyes like that. Burning like fire. Glowing.” His eyes widened. “Staring at me like ’twas gonna roast me, I’m telling you. Thought I was done.” He shook his head. “That power...”

“What power?”

“Like ’twas a storm in it. Like... I don’t know, I never felt anything like it. Terrible power... Couldn’t move and ’twas not even touching me.” He shuddered, hugging himself, his fingers curling in the rough, dirty sleeves. “A fiend.”

“How did that person look like?” asked the other stranger.

“Person?” He snorted. “Used to be, mayhap, before that fiend took him.”

“Him?”

“Him, her, I don’t know. ’Twas dark and I couldn’t tell. Only saw his back until he turned those accursed eyes to me.”

The stranger snorted. “Can’t you tell the difference?”

“I was not... entirely meself,” admitted the beggar.

“What about stature?”

“The what?”

“Height. Build.”

“Oh! He was tall and a fine one, aye. Walking nice, like ’em hoity-toities, ’cept his clothes were common. Smelled damn good, too. Had long, fine hair that smelled good.” He laughed bitterly. “And there I was thinking I’d have my way with him a little. Thought that was my lucky day.”

“You keep saying *him*.”

“Him, her, what’s it matter? If they’re fine, I ain’t fussy.”

“Anything else?” asked the first man.

The beggar gazed absently at the wooden mug in front of him. “He didn’t look it, but he was strong. Shook me off like a rag-doll and I ain’t no stripling. Then he turned those eyes to me and I thought that was it... Then some guards showed and he told me to scoot.”

“He let you go?”

“Would I be sitting here, drinking with you fine gentlemen if he didn’t? ’Twas a very near thing, I’ll tell you that.” He grabbed the mug with a shaky hand and downed the ale, wiping his mouth with the rough sleeve. “Been cursing

that day ever since.” For a while he just looked at his dirty hands, scratched and scabbed. Then he held one out.

“What?”

“I told you all I saw. Now gimme the coin you promised.” The soft spoken man took out the pouch and dropped it in his hand. He snatched it before the other could change his mind, weighing and fingering it. He took out a coin, then dropped it back. “Thank you,” he said simply, hiding the pouch in his clothes. “Don’t know why you’re so curious about it, but I’d stay away if I was you.” He stood. “Fates have mercy on me, ’tis the last time I flap my mouth about that cursed thing.”

He scuttled off, bumping into a customer who was just entering the tavern, then disappeared on one of the snowy side alleys.

“Are we going to let him go?”

“He’s miserable enough,” said the soft spoken man. “He won’t last long. We have more important things to do.”

CHAPTER THREE

Family

Ulmaby was an average sized village on one of the main roads of the southern region, which led to the capital. Its inhabitants, most of them farmers, were doing reasonably well for two reasons. Firstly, the lands were not tied to the name of any noble family, which meant that, by law, they belonged to the King. That was the same as saying they belonged to the kingdom and its people. So long as they obeyed the law and paid their taxes, people were free to live as they saw fit. Secondly, the road was fairly travelled and anyone coming from the east and heading to Ardaena, or the other way, would have to stop for one night at the Blue Firefly—so named because in the past the woods behind the village were full of them in summer, or so the stories said. There was another road coming through the southern fields and where the two met people had set up a market. Travellers who lodged at the Blue Firefly refilled their supplies there and every first Sunday of the month was a local market day, when people from the neighbouring villages came to trade goods and share news—which is to say they drank and gossiped.

Val—short for Valan—was born in Ulmaby to a skilled carpenter and a seamstress with a little knowledge of herbs. His childhood had not been particularly hard, but he had shown more interest in wandering the woods than in carpentering, and his father's endeavours to teach him the craft had failed. While the son acknowledged the beauty and usefulness of the trade, he found the process tedious and could never muster the patience to sit through it. The early death of his mother and a strained relationship with his father had driven him to the big city, but the truth was he had always wanted to study and see the world beyond their village. It seemed as though he had forsaken that place and his friends, but more than a decade later, the illness and subsequent passing of his father, which all his efforts were unable to prevent, had brought him back indefinitely. After spending many years in the crowded capital, he had come to realize that a peaceful home in the country was more to his taste. Ulmaby was only two days away, a mere trifle for a person as fond of travelling as he was, and he did not have to give up his intellectual pursuits. The woods of his

childhood, which he had missed dearly in the city, provided him with sources of study and means for a living. He still travelled a great deal, to be sure, but the cold months always found him in his quiet library, reading or writing down that which he learned or discovered, or in his work room sorting herbs and making experiments. And every time he returned from his journeys, he found the tranquillity of the countryside and simple society of his friends soothing.

This independent living did not suffer much after Kiran had entered his life, and he thought himself fortunate for it. The child had a quick mind and was just as curious as he was. From the very beginning Val had taken the boy with him on his journeys, teaching him everything he knew and encouraging a critical thinking. They were a bit of an odd pair in the eyes of the villagers, though in truth Val had always been regarded as an eccentric character. Most people lived their lives without leaving those places, bound to their families and land. When they did, it was seldom farther than the next village. Too few travelled as far as the capital. He had always been different, what with all his faring and unwillingness to settle down like any normal man. They could not understand him even as a child, much less as an adult. But he was an agreeable sort of person, friendly and good humoured, not to mention learned. He often came to their aid with all manner of clever ideas, so they liked him and, most times, overlooked his peculiarities. Of course they still had to pay whenever they fell sick and needed his assistance, but he never refused to help and found ways to settle the matter to everyone's convenience.

When Val had brought home the quiet, fourteen years old child, he had raised a lot of eyebrows. No one had heard of him ever getting married, or being interested in it for that matter, and they could not imagine him as a parent. He was too independent, travelled too much and showed no inclination towards a regular, domestic life. To their questions he had answered that Kiran was the orphaned son of some dear friends from the city and that he had taken upon himself to raise him, but had given no other details. Praiseworthy as it were, the story did not satisfy the villagers. No one knew much about his life in the city, but it must have been more exciting than that in their village. Val's simple explanation did not fit that image, so they came up with their own stories, each more remarkable than the other. One said he had been involved with a woman of questionable trade and she had disposed of a cumbersome child, who was

probably not even his—not only there was no likeness, but the boy was slow-witted, poor soul, he could not even speak properly. Another said the child was plainly his—why, he was just as peculiar!—but looked like the mother, most likely a high born daughter, judging by how pretty he was, who had given him away because she feared being found out by her family. Which was *a load of rubbish*, according to the sensible people, since that would have only made sense if Val had brought home a baby. But there was no denying that the boy was strange, so, whatever the case, the general consensus was that there was more to the story than he had declared.

“What’s it to you what he did and with whom?” grumbled Drest, the village smith and Val’s closest friend, whenever someone pestered him with questions. “Mind your own business and leave the man alone.”

Drest was not the prying sort, unlike his wife, Ansa, who was always curious about everyone, though her intentions were never bad. But even she knew nothing more and not for lack of trying. Val was clever and discreet and all her efforts to trick him into talking had failed. So, like her husband, she took his side.

“He already told you, people, what more do you want? It was very kind of him to take the poor child in, if you ask me. Very generous. How many of you would’ve done the same?”

“He didn’t have so many mouths to feed!” someone had protested.

“Well, now he has, are you happy?” she had retorted, with her hands on the hips, like a mother scolding her children.

Val had seemed quite diverted by the whole fuss, but his lips had remained as tight as ever. Eventually the story had died and people had moved on, for each had problems of his own. In time Kiran grew from the reserved, hardly speaking boy into a pleasant, friendly young man, and so alike Val in manners and thinking, that everyone grew used to him, as if he had always lived there.

The house in which they lived was comfortable and well sized—too large for just the two of them, in some opinions. Val’s father had built it at the edge of the village, towards the forest, where he had found his raw materials. As soon as the winter passed and the first leaves opened in the canopy, the two went in the woods on long walks, often coming back after dark, and later, when the weather became more suitable for travelling, their friends saw even less of them. They

were gone for weeks at a time, sometimes more than a month, but when they returned they spent another few weeks at home, helping the sick, sorting things and preparing medicine. They made stocks of pain powders, cold syrups and tonics for the villagers, particularly for the people close to them, in exchange for looking after their place while they were away. They could have sold those in the city and make a decent profit, for they were the good sort, but giving them away was a small price for their peace of mind. And since medicine was fairly expensive, the arrangement seemed to please everybody. In fact it had been going on ever since Val had moved back from Ardaena, but, now he had somebody to help him, things were easier and even more enjoyable. Kiran was an excellent pupil, quick to learn and hard working. He also possessed an innate affinity with living things, be it birds, beasts or any other creature. They seemed to respond to him, in a way that amazed and disquieted people at first, but Val had told them it was a talent which, however strange, was not unheard of.

* * *

It was the middle of summer and they had returned from a longer trip, which had taken them west first, then north, all the way to the mountains. On their way home Val's horse had grown an abscess in one of the hooves. They had found a farrier to help them treat it, but the poor animal had still had to walk the rest of the way back. Once home they had decided to defer other plans and let it heal properly. Their horses were their most precious companions and they spent as much time with them as with people, if not more. There was also another reason for a longer break. Rumours had started to spread that the army was gathering at the eastern border. The pessimists feared war was brewing, though the lands had not seen any major conflict during the rule of the last Royal House—King Evand Tighal was the third generation. And people had always had a habit of embellishing news. But on the way back they had met a company riding eastwards, a rare sight, and that concurred with the rumours. It made them wish to stay home for a while. Fortunately Ulmaby was roughly ten days away from the eastern border, in good weather. They hoped whatever might happen there will not reach them too soon. However, neither would the news or warnings and,

if things went awry, their village lay between the border and the capital.

Kiran watched Drest as he carefully trimmed Sylph's hooves, Val's grey gelding. The bad one was healing well, but he was still favouring it. Drest was incredibly gentle for such a tough looking, grumpy man. In fact he often seemed to get along better with horses than with people.

"Horses are intelligent and honest creatures," he had once told him. "You can trust them, unlike some people. They feel your heart... And they don't pester you with stupid questions."

Kiran had laughed at that.

Drest was the only person in Ulmaby who had not been taken aback by the way animals responded to him. Quite the opposite: he believed that was proof of a pure heart. The first time Val had taken him to the smithy, Drest was trying to shoe a beautiful, bay filly. For whatever reason the animal was skittish and the smith could not persuade her to relax. Yet when Kiran had held his hand out to touch, the horse had not shied. Instead she had lowered her head and had let out a fluttering breath. She had leaned into the touch with deep sighs, as the boy was walking his hand up and down the long forehead in a gentle caress, then further on the neck and shoulder, brushing the mane. It had left Drest agape.

"It's a gift of his," had excused him Val, knowing people were uneasy about it.

"It's his heart," had replied the taciturn smith, with unexpected warmth. "I've been struggling with her since morning. And I thought I was good with horses."

He had managed to do his work with their help, but at the end of it he was looking at the boy with different eyes. '*A horse feels your heart.*' That meant to the gruff man more than Kiran would have imagined.

"Send him here more often. I'll teach him a few things, build his body a little. He's too scraggy."

"I will," had agreed Val.

Kiran smiled fondly at the memory. Drest had kept his word. He had taught him to defend himself, bare handed and with a knife. Despite his bulky built, the man was very agile. He had also taught him about metalwork and horses. Drest had two smaller children of his own, and the three of them often watched him

work and helped him with various tasks that were suitable for their size. Nothing impressive, but it still made them feel strong and important. And when they grew bored, they played until Ansa called them inside for a juicy pie. That went on for several years, yet with all his efforts, Kiran remained *too scraggy* for a real man, if not equally weak.

"It's healing well," said Drest.

"Yes," agreed Kiran, stroking the gelding's neck with affection. "Don't worry, you have plenty of time to rest."

"So you're not leaving again?"

"Not for a while."

His own horse snorted loudly, eager for attention, and Kiran obliged, walking his hands on the dark coat and kneading him in places he knew his friend liked. "Be patient, your turn will come," he said, rubbing his forehead. "And then I'll take you out for a walk." Danan snorted again, excited.

"Is it because of the rumours? About a possible war?" asked Drest, while his hands kept working. They were rough and calloused and the skin on his thick fingers was cracked, but their touch was delicate.

"You heard those?"

"The inn's been having all sorts of folk, lately. People are talking... You think it's true?"

"I hope not. But it's true the army is moving."

The smith wiped his brow with the sleeve. "They say King Arne is a strange man. Mad, some say."

"I wouldn't know about that... You know people always exaggerate. It's what makes stories entertaining."

"I thought you knew more, since you two travel so much." When the pause grew too long, Drest raised his eyes to him.

Kiran shrugged. "Our business has not taken us that far east."

"Oh." The big man sighed. "That's why I prefer the horses. People can't seem to be happy minding their business." He let go of the animal's leg and stood up. "There, boy, you're done. Let's take care of your mate."

"Are you up for a drink, later?"

"Can't say for sure. I must fix the hinges on the pantry door. Ansa's been nagging me about it for a while, but I was too busy and they gave. If I don't fix

them, there won't be peace with her."

"Then you'd better," said Kiran with amusement. "Ansa can be terrifying."

"You've no idea," grumbled his big friend.

The summer months were generally hot and dry. Sometimes water level in the wells dropped and the shallow streams dried, only to fill again in autumn, with the coming of rains. There was no stream in Ulmaby, but there were many wells and people had captured an underground spring. The woods shaded the ground, preserving its moisture, and there was always water. Every now and then, after extremely hot days, there would be violent, roaring thunderstorms. Val and Kiran loved them and spent hours on the porch, watching the lightning that seemed to split the sky open and listening to the deafening thunders and the soothing patter of rain on the roofs. They seldom lasted more than a day, then the sky cleared, but this time the storm was followed by more rain. It was three days already since it kept pouring, incessantly, as if the whole sky were slowly falling to the ground. The roads had melted into fast rivulets and the mud was way above the ankle. It was impossible to go into the woods or in the fields and nobody travelled in such miserable weather, so, with little else to do, the villagers gathered at the Blue Firefly or the Ales & Tales to drink and tell stories. During these days Val spent most of the time in the library, writing. Kiran left him to his book, while he took care of the house or read on the porch, where he could hear and smell the rain.

The house was silent and the monotonous pitter-patter had sent him asleep. There was a deep, low rumble in the distance, growing larger and closer, until it burst with a sharp crack that startled him awake. It was dark and quiet. A darkness so deep he could not see his hands, and so quiet he heard his own, shallow breathing. And cold. Cold as though he were dead. It was so frightening he wanted to run, but he could not feel his limbs. He tried to scream, but he had no voice. And it was so dark he knew not whether he still had eyes. He felt nothing. He was just a thought, drifting in... in what? Where was he? What was that place? A faint golden light flickered ahead. Or was it behind? He could not say. It seemed to float closer, but he realized far and near had lost meaning, he could not tell them apart. Another one flickered, and then another. They were all around him, tiny golden beads, fine as raindrops, but not falling. They were

drifting with him. What were they? As if understanding him, one stopped. It was beautiful beyond words and its glow was throbbing almost like a heartbeat. He felt warmth. He wanted to touch it, but he had no hands. Suddenly, he understood why: he was one too, a drop of warm, throbbing light. And there were hundreds, no, thousands like him. There was an entire swarm, moving like a slow river, golden and so bright it was blinding. It flowed with a low, drumming sound, as if thousands of hearts were beating in unison. The river was alive. The hearts became one and he saw that the river was a giant, golden serpent. He turned his head and looked at him. There was so much wisdom and power in those eyes, the likes of which Kiran had never felt before. Yet they were loving and so familiar, as though he had always known them. He heard his breath and saw he had limbs, and opened his mouth. A drop of light came out of him and grew into a serpent. He looked at Kiran with fondness and told him something—what was it? And they left, two graceful, undulating creatures, a trail of thousands of glowing drops behind them. It was pitch black again and a sharp crack startled him awake. The light was dull and the rain poured incessantly, as if the whole sky were slowly falling to the ground.

A loud thud, followed by clatter, came from the library. Then a low grunt.

“Val?” he asked, still in a daze, trying to collect his thoughts.

“In here,” came a gasped reply.

He rushed into the library to find his father on the floor, a large stack of books crumbled on top of him and scattered about the room.

“What happened?” he cried, hurrying to take off the books and help him stand.

“I was looking for something and these just fell,” said Val, coughing from the fine dust that filled the air. He went to open the window.

“And I keep telling you we have too many,” started Kiran in a frustrated tone.

“Oh, shush!” silenced him Val. “You sound like Ansa sometimes—but don’t tell her I said so. I’ll talk to Alden later.” Alden was a carpenter, who had learned the craft from Val’s father, and another one of their close friends. He dusted off his clothes and looked around pensively, “Clearly I must,” then turned to his son, who was watching him with silent disapproval, and smiled as though nothing had happened. “You remind me of your mother... Except for that scowl,

I don't know whom you took that from."

"Don't try to change the subject."

"I'm not. But I cannot help noticing how very similar to her you are."

"Mother was beautiful," said Kiran, wondering about Val's true intent. It was not a subject they avoided, but bringing it up out of the blue was strange.

"And you have her countenance. Same cheeks, same smile, same expressions."

"Her eyes were like the forest in spring," he remembered, his frown slowly melting into a tender expression.

"Yours are the colour of autumn, like your father's. Isn't it interesting, how two opposite seasons finally met in their eyes?" Val gazed blankly, watching an old memory. "They were kind and lovely people, and had such a delightful child... *What ever happened to him?*" He shook his head with a resigned air, moving into the kitchen as if he had just remembered having important things to do there.

"He grew up with you!" cried Kiran after him, but that sudden irritation was gone. *You sly, manipulative old man*, he laughed, following him. "Why do you always do that?"

"I would not if you didn't criticize so much. Let us have a cup of tea."

"You taught me to be critical."

"Absolutely. Just not with me," said Val, smiling mischievously.

"I just had another dream," said Kiran, when they were comfortably seated on the little porch, their favourite place for conversation. Two cups were steaming on a small table—nothing more than an old, weathered stump—between them.

"Do tell me!" Val was always interested to hear those dreams. They fascinated him, despite—or perhaps because of—their incoherence and the fact that, similar though they were, they still could not decide about their meaning. Nonetheless Kiran recounted them in great detail, and they both marvelled at the beauty and strangeness of what he saw. "Heh, a serpent..."

Other times it was a fish, or a tree. Or just the river.

"It's interesting," said Kiran, "that I remember seeing this before when I'm awake, but not while inside the dream. Every time it feels as if I were there for

the first time. It's overwhelming and frightening in the beginning, then it becomes strangely familiar, but not as if *I were* the one remembering. Those are not *my* feelings."

"Because they are not your dreams. You are just an observer. A guest."

"Hmm... it feels more arbitrary than that. As though... I strayed into someone else's memories by accident."

"That's it, memories! Yes. That is what they must be. And you're not there by accident."

"I suppose. But I still don't understand their purpose."

"Perhaps it's too early. When the time is right, you will."

"I hope so."

They were silent for a while, drinking tea and listening to the low drumming of raindrops. Daylight was gradually fading, as the day moved into the evening. The air was infused with the musty smell of wet soil, soaked grass and a sour tang of leaves, bringing distant memories to Kiran's mind.

"Do you see any out there?" asked Val, absently staring into the rain.

"It's been raining for too long."

"With all the thunder, I was thinking—"

"*Neri*?"

Val nodded.

"The day of the storm was quite a feast," said Kiran. "But they hate so much water."

"Hate?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Oh! I didn't know that."

"*Kalari*," said Kiran after a while.

"Eh?"

"Thunderstorms attract *neri* and *kalari*."

"...The lightnings, of course! Mhm..." Val sipped from the tea, thoughtful.

"I cannot tell them apart."

"If thunder doesn't follow, it's *kalari*."

"Easy for you to say. With all that rumble..."

Kiran chuckled softly. "We might still see them tonight."

"I have often wondered why the inn was named the *Blue Firefly*," said Val,

continuing a thought that was only in his mind. “They say these woods used to be full of fireflies in summer. I never saw any.”

“You are thinking about *fuuri*?”

“It’s just a thought, though. I found no traces of a former stream or other body of water in the area, besides that underground spring... It could be that the fellow who came up with the name was drunk,” added Val, chuckling. He emptied his cup.

“Speaking of which, I would love a pint. Well, I would love a bit of liveliness, to be honest. You have been very quiet these past three days.”

“Mm, good idea. Too much rain can get to you.”

Val was right about Kiran’s resemblance to his mother, only he was one of those examples where the likeness between mother and son exceeded the usual degree. He was slender and had remarkable gracefulness. His bones were thin, his face long and narrow, his skin smooth and unblemished. And with the way those dark locks framed him—even when he pulled them back in a loose tail, in his usual manner—there was something soft, almost girlish in his air, especially when he laughed. As far as he was concerned, whether he was handsome or not was of no importance, since that did not make him who he was. Nonetheless he was aware his looks were not common for a man his age. If he did not attract the scorn of other members of his gender, it was because his confident bearing and fearless eyes compensated for the misleading physique. He was neither weak, nor shy. His friends sometimes teased him, though, knowing them, he did not take their jokes to heart. But every once in a while there would be a fellow whose feelings would become confused upon meeting him and things would become awkward.

The Ales & Tales was full, as was probably the inn. Half of the men were already drunk and there was a lot of chatter and laughter, but still the picture did not come close to what they occasionally saw in Ardaena. It was far more civilized. Not because people were better mannered, but everybody knew everybody else and they were accustomed to work together, not against each other. Of course things heated up from time to time, but brawls were not that often and fights were even less common. Folk usually gathered to enjoy a few

drinks after labouring all day, or pass the time with stories and jokes, when they could do nothing else. Tam, the owner, went from table to table, carrying pints and plates, talking to his customers and making sure everyone was happy. He barely managed, with the help of his children. Those days had been a blessing for his business.

All their close friends were already warmed up when they arrived. Ansa was there, too. Her children were gone to visit some friends, there was no reason she should not have enjoyed herself. Alden, a talented man with a quick mind and a strange sense of humour, was there with his son, Noll, who was a few years younger than Kiran. He was a widower and his friends had helped him cope with the death of his wife and raise his son, more than his own family. Noll had not turned out bad. *'There's still hope for you,'* Belesni often joked, but the young man did not mind it. She was another odd one among the villagers. She was not from those parts, but had settled in Ulmaby with her husband, only to be widowed a few years later, with no children. Still young—less than forty—strong and healthy, not beautiful, but pleasant enough, she could have remarried had she wished that, but she claimed she was still mourning. Kiran thought the reason was different: she had her own place—where she made the best pastries in the whole area—and was too nonconformist and outspoken for a woman. He liked her very much for that. In the last year she and Alden had spent more time together than before. They were an interesting gang, with all their peculiarities which set them apart from the rest of the village folk, loyal and trustworthy. He and his father cared deeply for them.

Like all folk in the tavern, they were high-spirited despite the dreadful weather, no less thanks to Tam's excellent ale. When it was just the two of them, Val and Kiran favoured the tea, but they took pleasure in having a few drinks with their friends and that particular brew was remarkable.

"We lost all hope of seeing you these days," said Alden.

"My fault," admitted Val. "Since we could not go out, I took the opportunity to finish some work."

"He closed himself in the library for almost three days," said Kiran, giving his father away.

"Are you planning to become a hermit?" asked Ansa with mild alarm.

Val laughed, waving a denying hand.

"What did you do during that time?" she asked his son.

"Plenty. The weather was perfect for a thorough house cleaning, I tried some new recipes and did a bit of reading."

"Poor boy," the woman said affectionately.

Kiran smiled. "I don't mind it."

"I wish my children were so responsible."

"They are still young, give them some time," said Val in their defence.

"Oh, who's talking! Kiran is more mature than you. Pray the Fates that he marries in our village."

Kiran almost choked on his drink. Where did that come from?

"I hope you will not stay single, like Val. It would be a pity."

"I haven't thought about that," he admitted, glancing at his father, who was trying to keep a straight face. Ansa's forward manner always amused him.

"Well, you should. It's about time you think of your future."

"Leave him alone, woman," grumbled Drest.

"Why? He would make such a fine husband. I would have him as a son anytime."

"He would make a fine *wife*," Belesni threw in casually, only a hint of laugh in her voice. "If he were a woman, that is."

Six pairs of eyes turned to her in surprise.

"Oh, don't give me those looks!" she retorted. "I was just saying. It cannot be I'm the only one who has ever thought so."

The eyes went back to the drinks and Kiran had a sudden, bad feeling. "Have I done something to upset you?" he asked her, leaning closer. She pretended to not understand.

Drest snorted. "I never thought that."

"You wouldn't, dear," said Ansa, poking him fondly. "Only you can come up with such ideas," she turned to her friend, "though, in this case, I can't disagree."

Belesni smiled mischievously. She was not serious, of course, she just enjoyed friendly banters.

"I have," said Noll suddenly, looking up from his mug. Kiran opened his mouth, but his friend raised a hand. "I mean, look at him! Fair as a lass and not a hint of beard, though he's older than me." His candid nature often incited friendly jests.

“Can’t argue with that,” agreed Alden, as if nothing were wrong with his son’s thoughts.

“Noll, dear, I was thinking about his housekeeping skills and how he looks after Val—”

“Or how he nags him,” mumbled Drest in his drink, so his wife would not hear him.

“—Rather than his looks, but you are quite right,” said Belesni. She was clearly thinking about Kiran’s looks.

Val said nothing.

“You should stop drinking,” said Kiran, pointing a finger towards Noll—in fairness the man’s eyes were glossier than usual. “I know you are a crazy lot, but don’t encourage him, too.”

“Who’s crazy?” asked Drest, frowning.

“I’m not encouraging anybody,” said Alden with a straight face.

“You’re not checking him either.”

“He’s old enough to think for himself.”

“I wonder.” Drest looked at Noll with pity. “You have a lot to learn, boy. A fine woman must have the proper curves in the proper places.”—Noll’s eyes sparkled, bright with youthful lust and alcohol—“Fleshy is what a woman should be, so you can feel her when you take her in your arms.” Usually Drest was not so eloquent on this subject.

His wife giggled. Her generous curves matched the burliness of her husband.

“Well said, thank you,” agreed Kiran.

“Not a pretty face on a twig,” added the man with a mocking upturn of lips.

A protest sparkled in Kiran’s eyes, spread to the cheeks and stopped behind the lips, soundless. “Forget it,” he dismissed it.

“And yet you are blushing,” said Belesni, winking. The woman was a fiend sometimes.

“Because this conversation is ridiculous!”

“Tell that to the chap at the bar.” Alden smirked, showing his true colours. He and Belesni made a right pair.

“What chap?”

“Young lad in the left corner? He’s been staring at you for some time now. Wonder why...”

All the eyes turned in the pointed direction, where a young man in his early twenties quickly looked away. Kiran could not suppress a smile, the poor man was red up to his ears. *Another fool*, he sighed to himself. He looked like a town boy from the middle class, probably a merchant's son, he supposed. Well dressed, but not ostentatious. Pleasant looking, but not remarkable.

"I think he fancies you."

Alden's voice brought him back. Knowing they were just teasing him did not make it feel less awkward. The young man was looking their way again and this time he boldly met his eyes.

"I think—" But he could not say what, because the subject of their talk was now heading towards their table.

"Good evening, sirs. Forgive my intrusion, but I was wondering if you could help us. My father and I are coming from Longdam and we are new to these parts. Could you tell us how far to Ardaena?" He was addressing all of them, but his eyes were looking at him.

Lame, thought Kiran, very busy with the seams of his left sleeve. *But well mannered*. Val nudged him, so he complied, but not before shooting his father a quick, warning look.

"Two days in fair weather, sir. Just keep to the main road." Short and to the point.

When it was clear Kiran would not say anything else, Val stepped in. "You should delay your departure until the rain stops, the roads are miry and troublesome."

"We know, we just arrived yesterday," said the young man. Then he just stood there in silence, not knowing what else to say. The others were throwing glances at each other. At last, he made up his mind. "Much obliged for your help, sirs."

"Not at all."

The man bowed and went back to the bar. They waited for him to sit before speaking, but the silly smiles on their faces were not a good sign.

"You were saying?" asked Alden with a smug look.

"That you will have to excuse me." Kiran stood up. "I need some air."

"In this rain?" asked Val.

"I smell too much perversity," came the answer, accompanied by a playful

grin.

“Chicken!” threw him Alden. But Kiran was already on his way out.

It was getting dark faster than usual. Heavy clouds hanged from the sky, so thick and grey that light barely permeated them. They had not seen the sun in three days and it looked like the rain was not going to let up very soon. Water was pouring from the eaves in shredded curtains and the road was running like a river. Along the walls people had placed wooden barrels to collect the rainwater, but they were spilling already. *That's not good for the crops*, thought Kiran. A long cloth was hanging on one side of the tavern, propped with wood poles to make a shelter. Tam had put it there for a bit of shade and its colours had long since faded. Now it sagged under the weight of water and the poles were slanting. He took cover under it, leaning against the wall.

The doorbell chimed, but he did not turn to look. A throat cleared.

“Am I disturbing you?”

He stiffened, recognizing the voice of the young man from earlier. It would have been rude to say yes. “No.” He moved a little to make space for him.

“...My name is Ceren.”

“Kiran.”

“That is an uncommon name. Well met, Kiran.”

Kiran nodded, but made no comment. There was a long pause.

“It does not look like it will stop very soon, does it?” said Ceren, watching the rain. “We were hoping to leave tomorrow,” he went on, when the other made no reply.

“Perhaps it will. It has been going like this for three days.”

“Is it normal?”

There was a flicker above the clouds, but no thunder. *Val would have liked to see this*, thought Kiran. “Not really,” he answered absently. “Summer storms are short around here.”

“Are you from these parts?”

He finally looked at Ceren, surprised. The light was weak, but he thought the man's face was flushed and his eyes a little too bright. It could have been from the drinks, though. “Of course, why would you ask that?”

“Forgive me,” mumbled Ceren, feeling foolish. “You look a little different,

that is all. I meant no offence.”

“No offence taken.”

The man shifted his weight, hesitating. “It would please me to have a drink together, if that were fine with you... I know your friends are inside, but maybe later?”

“Maybe later.” Though the question was harmless, the situation felt improper and he was growing uncomfortable with it. *It's their damn fault I'm suddenly so self-conscious.* But Ceren seemed satisfied with his answer. Kiran straightened.

“I should go back to them, I was out for too long.”

“Of course, I'm sorry.”

Stop apologizing, it's absurd!

Back at the table his friends were joking about them. They met him with insinuating smirks.

“I just spotted a wagging tail,” said Alden.

“A happy pup,” agreed Belesni.

“Oh, stop it!”

“We were just saying,” said the woman, pouting. “Whatever happened, he seems pleased.”

“Nothing *happened*,” replied Kiran, taking his seat. “I don't understand, do you find acceptable that a man might fancy another man?”

“Acceptable?” Drest snorted. “That's ridiculous!”

“Nonsense, dear, they're just teasing you,” assured him Ansa.

“You are taking this too seriously,” said Belesni.

“You started it. And I find the idea disturbing.”

“Because you haven't drunk enough,” said Alden, pointing to his mug. He waved Tam for another round.

“That suggestion is even worse.”

“Acceptable or not, it happens,” said Val. “Perhaps not here, but think of Ardaena, or any other large city. Such diversity of people and circumstances gives rise to all sorts of behaviours. Nobles can be quite liberal in their morals, and that is just one example out of many.”

“You are not helping me, Val.”

“And let's not forget the capricious human heart, which seldom obeys

reason,” went on his father.

“Damn right about that,” agreed Drest.

“The heart has its own reasons,” mused Alden.

“You cannot tell it whom to fancy and whom not to,” played along Belesni.

“You can’t...” echoed Noll, already tipsy.

“Brilliant, now you are all philosophists.” Kiran rolled his eyes. “I’ll remember never to trust your advice on propriety.”

“I’m offended,” said Belesni. “Are you suggesting we are indecent?”

“You enjoy pretending that. It’s just as bad.”

“We did not invite that man to our table. That was just coincidence.”

“But you have to admire his boldness,” said Alden.

“Faint heart never won fair lady,” agreed Belesni.

“Tsk! Very brave of him to ask for directions, indeed,” scoffed Kiran.

“Wasn’t that before? Why’d he have to follow you outside?”

“Why, Noll, I had no idea you have such an eye for subtleties,” praised him Belesni. “You’ve earned a drink for that.”

Noll’s mouth widened into a silly grin.

“Stop teasing them, you wicked people!” admonished them Ansa. “You’re not ones to talk about matters of the heart.”

“This is not about the heart,” said Kiran, losing his patience. “It’s about them being drunk and ignoring the obvious. Which is I’m a *man*.”

“Ha!” burst Drest, heated by the drink. “A *man*. Look at you! All the work I’ve done and you’re still thin as a stick. No wonder that fellow was confused. I bet your folks wanted a gir—” He stopped abruptly, realising his blunder. He sank under his wife’s menacing look. “I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant.”

Silence fell at their table, as the comment seemed to have momentarily woken up everyone from their inebriation. Kiran’s parents were a sensitive topic. They knew that Val had been good friends with them and that they were dead, and from Kiran’s own traits they concluded they had not been ordinary people, but that was the extent of their knowledge. Neither the son, nor Val would speak about them and their friends had always respected their wish to keep it private. And apart from occasional slips of the tongue or indirect remarks, most of them unintended, they never brought up the subject.

“I know,” said Kiran, looking into his friend’s apologetic eyes. “I know you

care for me and you took the time to train me, though I have not turned out as you were hoping.”—Drest denied that with a firm head shake—“And I would gladly prove your effort was not wasted,” the gentle tone changed, “were it not for the fact I’m much younger and I fear you might strain yourself trying to keep up.”

Drest’s eyes widened. “You... insolent brat! I could snap you like a twig. Show some respect,” he growled, straightening.

“Now, now,” his wife pacified him, “he was not serious.”

“My dear man, it’s not your fault,” said Val. “Our traits come from our families. We can always improve them, but there are things we cannot change.”

“Oh, he needs not change anything,” said Ansa. “You raised him well, dear, you should be proud.”

“Aye,” agreed Alden. “But perhaps you gave him too much tea, that’s why he’s so willowy.”

“Willows bend, but don’t break easily,” replied Kiran.

Drest snorted. “If only you’d done something about that mouth of his.”

“I did my best,” apologized Val with a humble face.

“Would you leave the boy alone? He’s young. Like you were any different at his age.” Ansa looked at Kiran with motherly affection. “Don’t you listen to them, Kiran, you’re just fine. Some have more strength, other have more wits. Sometimes I wonder which is better.”

Drest gaped at his wife incredulous—did she just call him stupid?—and everybody burst into laughter. Alden comforted him with friendly pats and he grumbled something in his mug, but his shoulders relaxed and a tiny smile crept to the corners of his mouth. And, after Tam brought another round of ale, they finally changed the subject.

Halfway in that round a woman came to the tavern, looking for the doctor. Her daughter was feeling unwell. Val and his son excused themselves and asked their friends not to wait for them. It turned out to be just a mild fever, for she had played in the rain despite her mother’s warnings, but the girl was small and they kept an eye on her for a while longer. By the time they were convinced all was well it was too late to go back. Kiran felt relieved for being able to escape a certain engagement and a bit of regret for disappointing the man waiting for him. Regret? No, it was rather pity. *It could not be helped and I’m not sorry. It would*

have been awkward.

Back home he reproached Val for not putting an end to their friends' joke.

"You are not a child anymore," replied Val. "It's time you learned to deal with these situations without my help."

"You practically encouraged them."

"I did no such thing. It was your reaction which added fuel to the fire." He sighed. He hated to see that unhappy look on his son's face. "I know you felt uncomfortable, but take it as a lesson. You cannot change who you are, so you must keep your head when someone provokes you. Or makes a pass at you, as it happened before. Control your emotions. It would be unfortunate and dangerous if your secret came out."

Kiran remembered the last time he had lost control, almost a year before, in Ardaena. The situation had been both dangerous and disgusting. At least he had dealt well with the guards, but that was because sarcasm directed at him made him defiant, but he could not handle embarrassment.

"Don't worry about our friends, they were not serious. You know they have a fondness for making sport of people... Well, it could have been the ale, but they meant no harm."

"I know and I'm not angry with them."

"Good," said Val, satisfied. "If a bit of teasing gets to you that easily, you are too weak. You need to get stronger." He patted Kiran's arm with fondness. Then, as if remembering, "Try not to stir Noll, though, he seemed genuine about it." He disappeared in his work room, leaving his son to wonder what that meant.

During the night the rain had finally stopped. The wind had blown the clouds away and the sky was the most amazing blue. Much of the water had drained, but the roads were full of puddles and the mud was soft and slippery. Kiran was running some errands when, in front of the inn, he noticed Ceren and his father—he assumed—preparing to leave. He turned around to avoid a meeting, but stopped when the young man called his name. He seemed a little disheartened and that made Kiran feel bad about his ungraciousness.

"I apologize for leaving last night without notice," he said when Ceren approached. He meant that, even though he did not regret. "A girl was sick and needed our help."

“You are a doctor?”

“My father is. I’m just helping.”

“There is no need to apologize, a person’s health is more important. Besides...” Ceren looked at his boots, then raised his eyes back to Kiran. “I was not really expecting much. I realized my behaviour must have seemed improper to you.”

“Not at all,” lied Kiran. Though, if not for his friends’ jokes, perhaps he would not have found that invitation out of place. “I would have joined you for a drink if I could.” Now that the man was leaving, the least he could do was spare his feelings.

Ceren’s face brightened. “Really?”

Kiran nodded. *A pup indeed.*

“I regret we have to leave today, but our business cannot wait any longer. At least the rain stopped,” said Ceren with a pleased smile, looking at the splendid sky. “Do you ever go to the capital?”

“Sometimes.”

“My father’s business will not take long, but I shall live there for a while. I hope we have the chance to meet again for those drinks.”—Kiran nodded again—“If you ever come to Ardaena, you will find me at the Deep Waters Inn. Our family owns it. You and your father will be most welcome.”

Deep Waters Inn? He did not remember that one, which was good. It meant he and Val had no business in the area. “Thank you, I shall keep that in mind.”

“I must go. May the Fates keep you safe!”

“And you,” replied Kiran.

As Ceren returned to his father, Kiran noticed the man’s gait was more confident, his shoulders square, his head higher. *That’s absurd*, he thought to himself, turning around. He went about his business, hoping to never have to face that man again.

CHAPTER FOUR

First impressions are long lasting

The summer was almost over and it was time to reap the rewards of many months of hard work. It had been a decent year, not the best, but the yield was satisfying. There was enough to keep them fed until spring, even longer, if they were moderate. People were busy in the fields and the harvest fair, that is the market on the first autumn Sunday, was drawing close.

The long break proved beneficial, for Val did a fair bit of writing and managed to finish his book. Sylph healed completely and they took a trip to Ardaena, to give the manuscript to Ermid and get hold of some money—travel or no travel, they still had agreements to fulfil—but other than that they did not leave the village. It was not hard to keep themselves busy and Kiran was pleased to spend some time with their friends. The news from the east were more frequent; the gathering of the army was no longer a rumour, though no soldier had marched on that road, yet. It was an unclear situation, as there had been no official announcement to state the reasons for these strange measures, and people were a little worried. However, since there had been no serious conflicts for so long and nobody knew what it was like to live in times of war, they went on doing what they always had, that is harvesting their crops and making provisions. The eastern border was far enough and whatever happened there, they thought, would not reach them.

It was on the morning of the fair that reality dawned on them, when a mounted company rode through the village in a long procession of dark uniforms, solemn faces and clapping hooves, filling the road from side to side. They had camped outside Ulmaby the night before, but whether they had arrived after dark or had sat camp far enough was unclear. Suffice it to say no one had been aware of their presence until they crossed the village the next day. They wore the the green and gold crest of the Royal House, which many knew of, but few had seen. It was early morning, but people were already gathering in the marketplace, getting ready for the fair. It looked like the weather was going to be beautiful and everyone was in high spirits. But when the cavalry arrived, taking them by surprise, they scrambled aside to make way for the soldiers. The sight was impressive and unsettling at the same time and, at first, people gaped and

talked and called their friends to *come see somethin' you won't believe*. Gradually their voices dropped to whispers, a feeling of uneasiness spreading among them when they realized what it meant. The children, however, roused from beds by the commotion, were laughing and clapping impressed by the beautiful horses—and indeed they were: tall, robust beasts with shiny coats and long manes—the leather breastplates and the swords most carried either on their backs or saddles. When, finally, the road was theirs again people resumed their activities, but for a while the spirits were not as high as before.

Soon the first carts from the neighbouring villages arrived on the southern road, animating the place and pulling them back into a lively mood. News of the cavalry spread like fire and those from Ulmaby who had seen it proudly described the procession to their neighbours, who had not had the fortune to assist such a rare event, as if they had a merit in it. The talk was not about the eastern border, though, the real sensation were the armoured soldiers, the long swords and the splendid horses which, as long time horse owners themselves, the villagers could truly appreciate. And *of course* the newcomers were envious and regretted not coming earlier to see it with their own eyes. Conversations became even more excited with the arrival of those from the western villages, who had seen the company the day before, and those coming from the east, who met it on their way to Ulmaby. People were wondering, making assumptions, worrying, debating and generally talking loudly, but as more men and carts arrived everyone's attention was drawn to their affairs and things turned back to normal.

The Ales & Tales and the Blue Firefly were also getting ready for the day. Despite being a local event, market days were busy and good for business, especially those during harvest. And this was the biggest of all. Nothing smoothed trade better than a good drink, so ales and stouts poured from the barrels all day, accompanied by chicken pottage, ham and sausages, all sorts of pies, cheese and griddle cakes. If such an event happened to take place during one of their breaks, Kiran would often lend Tam a hand in the tavern, doing anything from serving customers to washing the plates or helping Enid in the kitchen, alongside Tam and his children. Enid was his wife and an excellent cook and Kiran had learned a lot from her. He was paid for his work, but he also enjoyed listening to people's talk, so for all its exhausting aspects, it was an altogether pleasant engagement and he was looking forward to it. And Val

thought a change of pace always did good and encouraged him to accept such help requests whenever there was time for them.

About two hours after the morning's episode, a group of four soldiers returned to the village, looking troubled and in a hurry. Their presence caused a stir among people, though not as much as the first time. Those who had not seen the entire company were more curious than the rest, but the soldiers ignored everyone and went straight inside the tavern. They picked a table in a private corner, followed by the intrigued looks of the earliest customers, and beckoned Tam with an imperative motion. A needless act since Tam was already heading their way, surprised and apprehensive. Among them Kiran recognized, not at all pleased, *Grim-face* and his subordinate from that evening, a year ago, in Ardaena. He had good faces memory, but even if he had not, it was quite hard to forget that sharp look that had put him on his guard. His only hope was that their memory was less impressive than his own. They lived in a large city, Fates knew how many people they saw in one day alone. *Nevertheless*, he thought, *best to keep out of the way*. He busied himself behind the bar and let Tam take care of his gloomy customers. It was his place after all. But he could not resist the impulse to steal a glance. They were talking in low voices and seemed worried. One of them looked unwell; he was not talking, just sitting with his eyes half-closed as if he were tired, a deep crease cutting between his brows. *Strange*.

Just then Tam called him at their table. *So much for keeping out of the way*, he sighed, then composed himself and walked towards them with a calm step.

"How may I help?" The tired man's breath was difficult and his skin was shimmering with tiny drops of sweat. Kiran frowned. "Did you eat something bad this morning?"

The other blinked confused and tried to say something, but suddenly convulsed and covered his mouth. Kiran rushed to the bar and brought a bowl and the man retched a stream of vomit.

"Could you bring me a wet cloth please?"

Tam complied and returned with a clean, soft cloth, which Kiran used to gently wipe the face and mouth of the sick soldier. Tam stood there, troubled and not knowing what else to do.

"I'll handle this, don't worry. Others are waiting for you."

Three pairs of eyes were watching his every move with surprise and caution.

Grim-face's were cold and hard and Kiran imagined he saw a flicker of recognition in them. *Damn it!* He took a breath to ease the tightness in his stomach, utterly displeased with the situation. This was not how he had imagined that day would be.

"He is intoxicated. Fool's berries probably, but it's just a guess." That was the popular name for the dark, purple berries of poisonous bramble. He managed to keep his calm.

"How do you know that?" asked *Grim-face* in a voice just as cold as his stare.

Because I'm not a fool, he would have liked to say. "I have seen it many times. They are in season and grow a lot in these parts. The taste is slightly sweet, it's easy to mistake them for blackberries, hence the name... Is he the only one with problems?"

Grim-face muttered something unflattering about the poor soldier and his missing comrades. His subordinate—Kiran had nicknamed him *Smile-face*, because the last time they had met he was smiling a lot and, generally, he seemed the opposite of his superior—put a hand on his arm and turned to Kiran. "That is why we are here. Is there someone that could help?"

"I'll send somebody to fetch the doctor. Watch him, please, I'll be right back." He turned to look for one of Tam's children, but the man stopped him.

"Have we met before?"

"Not that I remember."

"You look familiar."

"You are confusing me with someone else." He left them, followed by *Grim-face's* icy gaze. *Damn him, he does remember.*

He asked Gelda, Tam's daughter, to look for Val and went in the kitchen. A few moments later he returned with a mug. "Drink this, please. Slowly."

"What is that?" asked *Grim-face*.

"Warm milk."

The doorbells stirred with merry jingles.

"Kiran? What happened?" Val rushed into the room, followed by Gelda.

"That was fast."

"I met him in the market," said Gelda, smiling with modesty.

"Thank you Gelda."

The girl nodded, blushing, and went to help her mother in the kitchen.

Val examined the weak soldier. "Fool's berries," he concluded.

The others turned their eyes to Kiran, looking impressed, but he ignored them.

"Not too many, fortunately," added Val.

"Why so? Are they deadly?" asked the fourth man with a childish naivete that did not suit his hefty built.

"Did you eat some, too?"—The man shook his head—"They are not deadly, but their effects are very unpleasant and may last for hours. The more you eat, the worse. When did it happen?"

"This morning, before we left. There are a few more sick, about four or five miles away on the road."

"How many?"

"Five?" said *Smile-face* uncertain, looking questioningly at his ill comrade. The man finally brought up four fingers.

"I see."

Tam came to the table, wiping his hands on the apron. "How bad is it?"

"He will be fine, don't worry," said Val.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Your hands are full already. Could I bother Enid for some milk?"

"I'll bring a mug."

"Make it a bottle, please. He's not the only one."

"Dear me," said Tam and he went to talk to his wife.

"Thank you, Tam. Kiran, can you bring the horses and three—no, four rolls of powders?"

Kiran left, disregarding the curious customers.

"Oh, and—"

"Charcoal," threw his son over the shoulder, before reaching the door.

"Yes." Then to the soldiers, "My son and I shall go with you to help the others."

"Your son?!" cried them in a chorus of incredulous voices, startling Val. He stared at them puzzled, but *Smile-face* raised a hand, "Never mind."

Half an hour later they were riding as fast as the queasy man could handle. His big friend had taken him on his horse, while his own followed behind.

Roughly five miles away they were hailed by a small group of soldiers, half of which were either writhing on the side of the road or retching, faces twisted with pain, while their comrades watched them helpless. Their mounts were quietly grazing not far from them, but the cavalry was nowhere in sight. A few kind people, on their way to the fair, had stopped to offer their help, but now they saw them coming, they returned to the carts and moved on.

They dismounted and rushed to tend to the sick ones. The others hurried to help, following Val's instructions without questioning. Fortunately none of the sick were excessively bad, only a couple worse than the first one, but they were in no condition to ride for a while. Val told that to *Grim-face*, who appeared to be the one in charge.

"We had no time to make proper introductions."

The voice of *Smile-face* took Kiran unawares. *Weren't you with Grim-face?* He tried to hide his displeasure. "The circumstances have not been the most favourable."

"I'm Bredan," *Smile-face* said casually, guessing his feelings.

"Kiran."

"That is a beautiful name. Well met, Kiran."

"That is something you say to a woman. Well met, Bredan."

"Ha, ha! I like your humour." Then, pointing to *Grim-face*, "Bran is our Captain, and the other two who rode with us are Cai and Owein. Cai is the sick one," he explained. "This lad is Bert and—"

Kiran stopped him abruptly. "I appreciate your civility, but I see no occasion for this. Not in our situation. I shall forget most names and who is who by the time you finish enumerating them." It was unlike him to be rude, but he was in a bad mood and making acquaintances among soldiers was the last thing he wished. He turned to the man named Bert, who was standing beside them. "I mean no offence."

"None taken," said Bert, rather amused by his bluntness. He was one of those left to watch over the sick till his comrades returned.

Bredan burst into laughter. It was rich, boisterous and infectious, so much so that Kiran could not resist smiling himself, for the first time that day since the soldiers had crossed the tavern's threshold. But they attracted everyone's

attention and now Val and Bran were coming to join them. That spoiled the moment and his smile faded quickly.

Bredan noticed. "I still feel like I've met you before," he mused, but Kiran ignored that.

"We did the best we could," said Val, packing their things. The soldiers did seem a little better. "All you can do now is wait. They vomited and the charcoal will clean what is left of the poison, so the nausea and drowsiness should subside. I gave them something for the pain, but the fruits have irritated their gut. It will hurt them for a while, though not as bad as before. I shall leave you more powders for that."

"How long before they can ride?" asked Bran.

"That depends on the person. A few hours, perhaps longer, I really cannot say that." Val paused, studying the captain. "There will be other effects soon... their bodies will try to clean themselves. Your men will need plenty of water." He saw that Bran understood.

"High-Captain Pryce said we must handle this as we can and follow them," said Bert. "They will not wait for us. They will leave in the morning, as planned."

"The border is more important, they cannot delay," said Bran. "But it won't be hard to catch up with them."

"I do not wish to sound meddling, but in that case may I suggest you wait until tomorrow?"—Everyone turned to Val bemused—"It's already noon," he said, undisturbed by their stares. "By the time they will be well enough to ride, you might not have much light anyway. I understand the urgency, but what is the gain if you rush at the cost of your men's condition? You have a long journey ahead."

He was quite right. *That's Val*, thought Kiran with pride, *always sensible*.

Bran clenched his fists, but there was nothing he could do about it. "Very well. If they are not fit for riding soon enough, we shall leave tomorrow."

The sick sighed with relief.

"But," pointed out Brad in a firm tone, "we'll have to move faster. No idling until we meet with the others."

"Yes, Captain!" chorused the men.

One of the soldiers leaned closer to Kiran. "What was the charcoal for?" he asked in a low voice. He seemed the youngest of them, perhaps younger than Kiran.

"To soak up the poison. It's like... a sponge."

"And then? I mean I never saw anyone eating coals," he added, a little embarrassed.

"This is not common coal. And it will not harm them, they will just get rid of it."

The man was staring at him, waiting.

"Really?" Kiran forced himself to stay serious. "Ask your captain later."

They were ready to leave and a soldier brought their horses, who had wandered off with the others, grazing.

Bran made a dignified, but heartfelt bow. "Thank you very much for all the help. We are in your debt."

"Not at all, Captain. May the Fates keep you safe."

"And you too, Doctor. Kiran."

Another bow, slightly stiffer perhaps and using the name instead of an honorific, but still more sincere than mere courtesy. Coming from such a rigid person—arrogant was the word Kiran would have used—the surprise caught him off guard and he could not reply.

And while they were mounting, Bredan suddenly exclaimed, "You are the zealous fellow!"

Kiran almost fell off his horse.

"What was that?" asked Val when they had put some distance between them.

"A long story." Kiran blushed, remembering he had not mentioned his first encounter with those men. Despite his initial hesitation, the following morning he had told Val about the assault and its conclusion. It was too serious a matter to hide from his father, but he thought the conversation with the guards was irrelevant and had skipped that part. Perhaps there was also a little resentment in there.

"We have plenty of time."

Kiran sighed, but there was no choice, so, while they trotted leisurely back to Ulmaby, he recounted his father the unpleasant exchange between him and Bran,

the night they met in Ardaena.

* * *

It was only the first week of autumn and the summer heat still lingered during the day, as if the world were not ready to change seasons yet. But the weather was more pleasant, the air not as hot as before and the nights were cooler. Still, the soldiers looked for shade to hide from the midday sun. It had been a pleasure to ride and camp at the edge of the woodland the day before, despite the fact their quest for berries had turned out a poor idea—the five sick were drowsy and their guts were rebelling. But the woods were behind them and the road wound forwards through beautiful, scented meadows, sprinkled with trees that grew solitary or in small groves. There was one not very far ahead, so they pulled the horses—since riding was out of the question for some—and trudged towards the shadow of the old trees. There was even a small stream that flowed gently from the north and crossed the road, meandering through the grass like a silver snake. The water was cool and clear and the horses went straight to it, dipping their muzzles and drinking with noisy slurps. *How fortunate*, thought Bran. There would be no need to ride to the next village—just over a mile and a half away—to resupply. They took shelter under a large beech, lying on a patch of grass. Two men went to fetch fresh water.

“What was that about, earlier?” was Owein curious, after they quenched their thirst. He looked older because of his big body, but he was not yet in his thirties. A capable man, albeit a bit naive. “The zealous fellow?”

“Aah, *that*.” Bredan glanced towards Bran and chuckled, knowing the subject always annoyed his friend. Which, in turn, amused him. Bran made a wry face.

Seeing their reactions, now everyone was curious. “Well?”

“There’s nothing much, really. We met Kiran a year ago, in Ardaena. One evening, when we were returning to the Garrison, we crossed paths with him just as he was about to be mugged.”

“You fought the mugger!” said Rowan.

So eager. “Um, not quite.”

“Pfft!”

Bredan turned to his friend. "What?"

"About to be mugged," scorned Bran. "He scared the wits out of that bastard and then let him go. He practically helped him get away."

"And how do you know he did that, may I ask?"

Of course he knew how, this was just teasing. They had talked a lot about it and both had agreed that Kiran's behaviour had seemed off, his story made in the spur of the moment. But his proud friend hated to be mocked or patronized, especially by *cocky brats*. And there was also that eerie side of that meeting, which had disturbed Bran exceedingly, though Bredan never joked about that. They had made inquiries at the Miller's Inn, after returning from a mission, but either Kiran had lied about dining there, or the innkeeper had already forgotten. And it irked Bran that he could not figure out the truth. That meeting had left a bitter taste in his mouth. No wonder then that, despite a year going by, running into him again had roused some resentments.

"For Fates' sake, Bredan, you were there! He mocked us, it's insulting."

"*That* Kiran?" asked Owein, pointing roughly in the direction the doctor and his son had gone. The man seemed kind, perhaps a bit reserved, but certainly not hostile or menacing.

Bredan nodded. "He was not forthcoming," he conceded.

"That's a nice way to say he was lying. I cannot accept to be dismissed like that. Not by a cocky brat." Bran stressed the words by pulling a handful of grass.

"Oh, let's be honest, he's not that bad. What about today, then?"

"It doesn't change what happened."

"No, but it does show there's more to him than we thought at the time. He is not some shady fellow."

"He's still insolent."

"He's bold, yes. I like that. You are taking things too personally."

Bran scoffed.

"I think what really annoys you is that he defied you. But don't forget you provoked him." Bredan lay on his back, arms under head. A playful smile was tugging at the corners of his lips and he was trying to contain it. If Bran were not so serious, he would not have teased him so much, but as it was, he simply could not resist. "Honestly, I think you two are very similar."

"Fates forbid!" snapped Bran, rising to his feet. He stretched and strode to the

water without another word.

In the beginning it may have come as a surprise to some of them that Bran allowed his friend to openly tease him in front of his subordinates. He had not always taken it so calmly. But then again, their strong friendship was well known and no less surprising. Most saw them as different as day and night; only the closer ones had noticed the similitudes beyond their outward personalities.

"You are a talented man, who seems to have no faults. And so aloof, people find it difficult to understand you or meet your expectations. If you want them to follow you, let them see you have imperfections, just like them. They make us human," Bredan had told him. The idea had revolted Bran. "I'm not saying you should expose yourself to derision. Just let them glimpse your true feelings. They need to know you're not that different, that you can sympathize with them. Of course there must be limits, but a rigid attitude has never won loyalty or trust."

Bran had never had any real friends before he met Bredan, and those who knew him from his days in the City Guard swore he was different now. Still serious and demanding, but more approachable. Less arrogant and easier to talk to. In truth he had never been arrogant, it was his austere manner that was misleading. But Bredan had been right. Although their comrades never dared to take such liberties with him as his friend did, most had a high opinion of him and respected him both as a captain and as a man. And even his best friend never crossed a certain line.

"Well? *What happened* that evening?" asked Bert with impatience.

Bredan told them the story. Not all of it, he was careful to leave out the disturbing parts, both out of respect for Bran and because it was wiser to keep that between the two of them.

Glen whistled. "That lad's got courage to talk to the Cap'n like that," he said when the story was over. The others agreed.

"Why? He was very polite," said Rowan. They looked at him in that indulgent manner an elder looks at a young, inexperienced boy, too eager for his own good.

"Because he played with fire. You don't cheek our Cap'n," said Glen, like a father explaining his son the ways of life. He was older than the rest of them and not very educated, but he had a caring heart and more common sense than most.

Rowan quivered. "No!"

"That's why it bothers him so much," said Bredan. "I suggest you keep this to yourself. Don't tell others and don't make comments. Unless you want to deal with him."

The last words were a warning and they nodded in silence. Bran was fair and reasonably tolerant, but still unnerving. Just like his father. They knew not to cross him. And because he was returning from the stream, they closed the subject.

The sick men stirred and groaned and a few stumbled away among the trees.

"Dear, oh, dear," said Bredan, standing. "I fear we have to spend the night here." He turned to Bran, who was watching them with concern and frustration.

The shadows were growing longer and by the looks of it they had no chance to meet with the rest of the cavalry that evening.

"We'll stay," decided Bran. "We don't have much food, but at least there is fresh water."

"That won't be a problem for all of us." Bredan looked towards the trees. The sounds coming from there were very suggestive and unpleasant. "I bet food is the last thing they want to see right now."

"They need strength. We should eat something and rest. We'll take turns watching tonight." Bran motioned to his men to unpack and set up camp.

"Good thing they left us some medicine," said Bredan, while unsaddling his mount. "The Doctor said to give them some if necessary, but they will be well enough tomorrow."

"I hope so. Hurry up, I want to take a look at the map." He was understandably in a bad mood.

* * *

"The water is too cold, ha, ha, ha!"

Val was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes and his belly ached. He was leaning forwards on his horse, to steady himself. Kiran's nose wrinkled. He thought his father's amusement was a bit excessive, especially when his own

feelings were the exact opposite: Bran's gratuitous, undisguised distrust had insulted him, both back then and earlier, at Tam's place. Val's enjoyment was off-putting.

"I hope you fall off that horse," he grumbled.

"Don't be ungracious," admonished him Val, wiping his tears. "But that explains a lot. I was wondering at the animosity between the two of you."

"He started it."

"He had reasons, your behaviour was suspicious."

"There was no reason to be sarcastic, I was neither condescending, nor uncivil."

"No, but you were a little too stubborn for someone in your situation. Another would have welcomed their assistance. And I sense that captain cannot be deceived so easily. He may be reserved, but he's sharp."

"I don't think he believed me—"

"That is obvious, from your account."

"—But at the time I feared he might have seen more."

"A little late to worry about that after you let the cat out of the bag."

Kiran bit his lip. "I don't know how to stop *him*. I tried, but *he* doesn't listen," he said in the same tone a child would use to exculpate himself, knowing full well he was guilty.

"That's why I keep telling you to control your emotions."

His son nodded without arguing

"I don't think he saw anything," continued Val, "otherwise his friend would have, too. It is more likely that he was offended by your attitude."

"I was nothing but polite!"

"In speech, not in message. I think he made the difference."

"But he started it," pouted Kiran.

"And you simply could not disregard the affront." Val sighed. "Sometimes you are too proud and I fear it's my fault. But keep in mind that pride can be offensive and it will draw attention to you. And some eyes see deeper than others."

Val had this gentle, but firm way of reproving, always bringing arguments which his son could not disagree with. It made him feel ashamed and regretful, that was why he feared his disapproval. He hated to disappoint his father.

It was well past noon when they reached Ulmaby, and the place was swarming with people. They filled the whole marketplace and even spread along the southern road, all the way to the edge of the village. Everyone was talking, bargaining, chatting and laughing, and in the middle of the market a group of locals were playing music. It was difficult to move around and they had to dismount and pull them by the reins to get through to the tavern. The Ales & Tales was full and just as lively. Tam and his children were barely managing.

"Thank goodness you're back," rejoiced Tam, wiping his forehead with the shirt sleeve. His round face was red and sweaty. "How's that poor lad?"

"He will be fine," said Val. "They all will."

"They? Ah, yes," remembered Tam. He turned to Kiran, uncertain. "You came back to help, I hope?"

"I promised, didn't I?" Kiran's stomach made a growling noise. "If we could just have a bit of that deliciously smelling stew before," he added with an embarrassed smile. Val happily seconded him.

"Leave it to me," said Tam and disappeared in the kitchen. He was short and fairly round about the middle, and had all the grace of an old goose, but he was unexpectedly quick.

Val looked around, spotting Alden and Belesni at one of the tables. Their friends saw them as well and waved them to join. Before they even had time to answer, Tam was back with a tray with two bowls of steaming stew, fresh bread and ale to push the food down.

"Thanks, Tam, I'll take those." Kiran took a deep breath. "Mmm, nothing compares to Enid's cooking!"

Tam grinned with pride. "She'll be happy if you tell 'er so." He motioned a refusal when Kiran wanted to pay. "Never mind that. Come to the kitchen when you finish." And he left to take care of the customers.

They took the tray and went to sit with their friends.

"Hallo there, travellers," said Alden in a cheerful voice.

"How's the sick lad?" asked Belesni.

"You heard about that already?"

"Good ol' Tam told us."

"He will be fine," said Kiran, sitting. "City folk. Cannot tell the difference

between berries.”

“Of course not, they don’t grow in Ardaena,” said Val in their defence.

“Don’t they ever get out?” asked Belesni.

“Not everybody does. When was the last time you left the village?”

“Then they shouldn’t go foraging if they don’t know what to look for,” answered the woman. It was common sense.

Alden snorted. “As if you never saw it happen to village folk.”

“Where’s Noll?” asked Val, blowing the hot stew.

“I sent him on a little errand,” answered Belesni in Alden’s stead. “My pies are selling like warm bread and I asked him to help me today. He should be back shortly.”

The stew had cooled enough and Kiran wolfed it down as though he had not eaten in days, it was that good. Enid could make the simplest of foods taste delicious.

“Someone was hungry!”

“I never get tired of Enid’s stew. And I promised Tam I will help him today.”

“That is very kind of you,” said Belesni. “But he ought to pay you for it. Days like this are exhausting.”

“Oh, he is, though I would have helped him anyway. He is always obliging.” Kiran emptied his mug, wiping his mouth with a clean handkerchief, and excused himself. He went straight to the kitchen.

Val stayed with their friends a bit longer, then they parted ways.

It was not until nightfall that Kiran came home. He found his father reading in the library.

“Why didn’t you come back to Tam’s? Everyone was asking about you. I’m too tired to drink, but you can go if you wish...” he trailed off, noticing their travel bags sitting open near the desk. “Are we going somewhere?”

Val looked at the bags, but made no answer. He just closed the book and carefully placed it on a shelf between the others. Then he went to the kitchen, took the steaming kettle from its hook above the hearth and poured tea for both of them with reflex moves, as though his mind were elsewhere. That made Kiran frown, but he said nothing. Pestering his father with questions when he was in that mood never helped. He had to be patient.

“Let’s sit outside. It’s a beautiful evening,” said Val, at last.

They took their places on the porch, listening to the sounds of the night. The sky was dark already and the first stars flickered with dim light, but the moons were not above the forest yet. The day was over and most people were taking the long way back to their villages, but the Ales & Tales was still full when Kiran had left it. Faint voices and laughs occasionally reached them, drowned a moment later by the chorus of crickets. A dog barked somewhere, stirring a cacophony of answers from its neighbours, but their racket died quickly. The light breeze cooled the air, carrying pleasant scents from the woods.

“I love this smell,” murmured Val. “Always had.” He puckered his lips, blowing softly to cool the tea.

“Your mood is strange.” There was a worried ring in Kiran’s voice.

Val blinked as if waking from a dream. “Perhaps I’m getting old.” He smiled.

“You’re barely fifty,” protested Kiran. “What were you doing with our travel bags?”

“Remember that time we went to Fiodhin? The woods around it were so beautiful.”

“All woods are beautiful.”

“Yes. But I recall you were particularly delighted with those.”

Kiran took a moment before answering. “Near the border, where things are stirring... that’s where you want to go?”

“It’s the best time of the year to collect roots. There are some plants that grow in those parts, which are high in demand.” Val sipped from his tea, staring towards the black outline of the forest. “That captain—Bran, was it?—said they are assembling in Fiodhin. Since they are royal guards, I’m assuming a member of the royal family is there. The city will be well protected.”

“You want go there with the soldiers?”

“We. We could go there with the soldiers. And why not? It’s safer than travelling alone.”

Since when? Kiran was astonished. Firstly, ever since Val had taken him in they had avoided the eastern border. The week in Fiodhin had been an exception, because an old friend of Val’s had asked for his help, but they had been vigilant. During that time they had taken the opportunity to see the woods a few hours’ ride north-west of the city. Kiran had relished that trip, openly expressing his

regret about its short duration. Secondly, they travelled alone. Folk favoured travelling in groups or joining other folk on the road, for safety and company, but people were curious and tended to ask too many questions when they had nothing better to do. Not to mention the two of them were too fond of their independence to exchange it for company. So oftentimes they avoided the main roads. Thieves favoured the same ones merchants did, therefore there was less chance of running into them. That is not to say they had never been in difficult situations, but they were not helpless. On the whole their journeys so far had been pleasant and with little notable danger. Val's reasoning made no sense. Unless...

"Of all times, is there a particular reason to go there *now*?"

Val did not answer immediately. He fumbled with one of his pockets and produced an opened letter.

"This came from Ermid, two days ago."

Kiran rushed inside and returned with an oil lamp, placing it on the stump table between them.

"What does it say?"

"You may read it yourself."

"Old Plane Square, Sept. 1st.

"My Dear Friend,

"I hope this finds you well.

"Your manuscript is currently being transcribed. As usual, it is well written and an enjoyable read, even if the subject may not seem of interest for the average reader. You have a talent with words. But this is not the reason I am writing you. Something has happened and I thought I ought to let you know, since it appears to concern you. I daresay it is nothing of consequence, nonetheless you should decide that yourself.

"Yesterday, around lunch time, two gentlemen came to my shop and asked whether I have any books about the ancient race Eina. As it happens, at the moment I do not, but I was going to suggest them to return in a fortnight, as I have already placed an order for your book.

With the recent events it is quite in demand. I sold the last one, my own copy no less, a week ago, to a gentleman who absolutely insisted to have it. Very unlike me, I know, but he was persistent and willing to pay more. Were he not so distinguished, perhaps I would have refused him. But I digress.

“Before I could make said suggestion the two gentlemen went on to describe the book they were looking for and, to my surprise, it was the same one I had in mind: yours. Not only that, but they spoke with an odd accent and I am fairly sure it was eastern, unless my ears have lost their finesse.”

For a moment Kiran thought his heart had stopped. He raised alarmed eyes to his father.

“Have you finished? Then go on,” prompted him Val, when he shook his head.

“Rather unexpected, do you not agree? Of course I told them I do not have it, but I know of the book in question. Do I also know the author? Because they were very interested in meeting him. Another unusual wish. Though perhaps it only seemed unusual in that situation, because I felt there was something amiss about them and it made me a little uncomfortable. Their look or their tone, or perhaps the fact they had come so far with such purpose, I cannot say which. So I explained them I have seen hundreds of books in my life. I may remember one for its content, but I cannot possibly remember all authors. And here comes the strangest part: they were told the author was a certain Valan, though they knew not his other name. I suppose they thought it would ring familiar, but I told them I do not recall any author going by that name.

“Long ago you said the purpose of your pen name is to shield you from unnecessary attention. Had they asked about Ellis Greene, perhaps I would not have written this letter, but they did not even mention him. You understand why I felt the situation was strange. They

were not very persistent, thankfully, and I have not seen them again since, but I thought it best to tell you that someone is looking for you. Rest assured, I spoke to no one else about this visit.

“Please let me know that you and your son are well and that I have done the right thing. And if there is anything I can help you with, do not hesitate to say. You can always count on my discretion.

*“Yours, truly,
“Ermid Dhal”*

Kiran's hands were trembling slightly as they folded the letter and placed it on the table. He could not say anything for a few moments, knew not what to say or believe. And when he finally spoke, his voice was almost flat, very unlike him.

“Does anyone else, besides us and Ermid, know you are Ellis Greene?”

“Only Drest and Alden. I told them a long time ago, before you came here.”

“Nobody else in Ardaena? Another bookshop keeper, perhaps?”

“Nobody else *anywhere*. I will not deny that using a pen name was just a caprice when I started, but if I told people about it, wouldn't that defeat the purpose?” Val gazed upon their garden, but the light of the lamp made the farther corners indistinguishable to his eyes. “Dear Ermid, he must have been quite worried.”

Kiran did not hear that. His thoughts were only about the content of that letter.

“He is still looking for me. For us... After eleven years, I was hoping he had given up.”

“Never underestimate a powerful man who wants something,” advised Val, turning a serious look at him.

“They know your name.”

“Someone in Maelifeld must have remembered me.”

“But why turn their search to you, after so many years? And what spurred this search?” Then he realized. “That evening...”

“That man must have spoken, despite your warning. Somehow, it reached their ears.”

"They have people in Ardaena."

"As do we in Vres, I'm sure. Some are official, other not so much, but that has to do with politics, not us. It was pure chance, most likely."

"But that was a year ago."

"It must have taken some back and forth before they came across my name."

"It's all my fault." Kiran sank in his seat. "I'm sorry, Val."

"It is your fault. And it is also my fault. We both let our guard down and now regret it, but how does this help us? Instead of blaming ourselves, we should think about what to do. We are fortunate to have been warned."

Kiran's expression softened. "Did you answer Ermid?"

"Of course I did. I also sent him a little gift, though I'm sure he doesn't imagine how much we are indebted to him."

"What should we do?"

Val watched his son for a moment. He seemed to have recovered from the shock of the news, but his fingers were restless, his lips tense and a few shallow creases still seamed his forehead.

"They haven't found us, yet," he said gently.

"No, but now that they have your name, how long before they find someone who knows where you live? Why didn't you tell me about the letter sooner?"

"Because I didn't want to spoil the fair for you." He stopped Kiran before he could object. "And I wanted a little time to think about it."

"We could have done that together!"

"Sometimes you are too impulsive. But I'll admit that you took the news better than I feared." Even though he didn't say it, it was obvious from his tone that he was proud of his son. "Now that the fair is over, it's time for a new trip. I don't think they will find us so easily, nonetheless we should be on the move again."

"East?"

"What better place to hide? They may be clever, but I doubt they would expect that. It's against common sense, especially at a time like this. And Fiodhin may not be the capital, but it's a busy city, more so now that the soldiers are gathering there."

"A needle in a haystack?"

"A well guarded haystack," stressed Val.

“What makes you think Bran would let us join his group? They are not civilians. They have a mission and must move fast. We have nothing to do with it.”

“It doesn't hurt to have a doctor around. We can handle ourselves and shall not be a burden. If anything, we're doing them a favour.”

“Another one?” Kiran's eyes narrowed. “Is this why you didn't take any payment this morning?”

Val slurped his tea noisily. It was something he often did when his son criticized him, either to show disagreement or to spite him, in a childish way. “Are you saying I cannot be generous without ulterior motives?”

“No, I know your generosity is wholehearted. But suggesting to join their group just after doing them a free service cannot be mere coincidence. You were contemplating the possibility, weren't you?”

“Well, perhaps it crossed my mind earlier, while helping those poor men. But under better circumstances I would have helped them just the same. Make no mistake about that.”

His son smiled, because he knew that was true.

“Nevertheless, this morning's events may work in our favour.”

“I doubt that stubborn stick will agree to it,” scoffed Kiran. Even though Val's suggestion was reasonable in the light of those news, he could not help feeling displeased. Not only were they supposed to leave their peaceful home in Ulmaby for Fates knew how long—which was not the same as their usual travelling; that was freedom, this was fleeing—but they would have to ride for days in the company of that obnoxious person, whose mere presence ruined his mood. It was an awful prospect and he was not sure he would be able to check his manners for so long.

“Don't let resentment get the better of you,” said Val in a tone of mild reproof. “That man has faults, but they don't seem of reason. You don't have to like him and we are not looking to make friends. We shall merely take advantage of a situation.”

“Suppose he would agree. We don't even know where they are. Perhaps they already met with their company.”

“Perhaps. It would please me to know our assistance was so effective, but I think it is more likely that they will leave in the morning. We can catch up with

them if we ride off before sunrise.”

“And if they left?”

“We have nothing to lose. If you don’t mind joining them, we’ll catch up in a few days. The company is much slower. If not, we’ll be on our own, as always. Whatever the case, we must set forth.”

“What about preparations? And the house? And our friends? We never leave without letting them know.”

“I may not have told you about the letter earlier, but don’t think I wasted that time. I paid Drest a visit after lunch and told him a friend needs my immediate assistance. You know he doesn’t ask questions. He will find a letter in which I explained a few things. I trust him to keep a secret and handle things in case someone comes looking for us. As for the house, it’s the usual arrangement, our friends will look after it. We will travel light, as always, but I did prepare a few things. This journey will be a little different, if only for the fact we cannot foresee our return.”

Kiran was astonished. “You thought of everything. Alone! This makes me feel even worse for not knowing about it sooner. Though it was you who withheld the news from me.”

“Don’t be childish, it is my wish to protect you.”

“But if it were not for me, your life would be—”

“Less rich and stimulating, no doubt. I’m sure I would have aged much faster. Shush, now, you’re talking nonsense. If I had wanted a dull life, I would have stayed in my home village and carved wood.”

Kiran chuckled, imagining Alden’s reaction at that statement.

“Not that I have anything against carpentering,” added Val, guessing his son’s thoughts, “Alden is a wonderful craftsman. It just never suited me.” He stood up and came in front of him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “I know this is sudden and I’m not trying to force you. That we must leave as soon as we can is obvious, but we don’t have to ride with them if you dislike it. I just think it would be safer.”

“Yes.”

“Think about it, but don’t take too long. There is not much time.” His fingers brushed a dark lock which had strayed from its bonds. “You have never been a burden, my boy.” He smiled fondly and went inside, taking the cups with him.

Kiran snuffed out the lamp and reclined in his seat, staring at the sky and the two moons that were rising above the trees, one silver and one gold, trying to calm the storm in his mind.

He opened his eyes. The room was still and pitch black, but he felt he was not alone. Something was there, a dark, heavy presence looming over him, weighing him down. His chest was too heavy. He blinked to clear the blackness from his eyes, but to no avail. Were his eyes really open? *Get up*, sprang a sudden thought. *Run!* It had an urgency which bespoke danger. Just as it came to his mind, trying to command his limbs, he became aware he could not move. His whole body was inert—not numb, just unresponsive, as if some force were standing between his will and his muscles. But his physical senses were very much awake and he felt strong, immaterial rings binding him, in the same way the hoops bound the staves of a barrel. Fear came upon him as he realized he was standing naked and helpless in front of something overwhelmingly powerful, which could see into the farthest corners of his mind while staying hidden from him. A greedy, malicious will, whose intent—he soon understood—was not to end him, but to use him to end everything else and force him to behold the destruction without being able to prevent any of it. To rob him of everything he held dear and torment his heart, until nothing was left in it, save for pain and despair. *I'm dreaming, I must be dreaming. It cannot be I'm awake!* He screamed in horror, but he had no voice. His body was inert. His eyes were blinking to no avail, because everything was pitch black. *I must be dreaming! Why cannot I wake up?* Lost in that darkness, naked, powerless and stricken, all he could do was hold his breath and wait.

A tiny golden light flickered before his eyes. It throbbed, almost like a heart, and its faint glow grew to brilliance. Small though it was he felt warmth coming from it. He felt hope. Then another light flickered, and then another... and another. Tiny drops of golden light, fine as raindrops, drifting with him. Tens. Hundreds. Thousands. Engulfing him like a river, flowing gently, pushing away the darkness. There was something familiar about it. The rings binding him snapped. The will shuddered; its grip weakened and gave. He could not see it, but he felt the river pushing it back—its malice struggling against the low drumming of thousands of hearts beating in unison. And as it happened, the will

took shape. *A man? I know this man.* He was throwing long, clawed arms towards him, trying in vain to grab him back. There was something on one of the fingers, sparkling golden and red. A ring? The man's rage made him tremble with fear, but the river of light flowed gently around him, sheltering him. *Am I safe? Who am I?* He was one of those drops of light, drifting with the river... Eastwards.

I am safe... but for how long?

Kiran opened his eyes. His heart was beating fast, echoing in his ears. His breath was short and his skin was slick with sweat. The room was dark, but through the slats of the wooden shutters came faint light. The room was still, but he heard a dog barking outside. He was alone. He stood up—he could move. He went to the window and opened it, breathing in the scent of the forest, feeling the cool wind, listening to the comforting sounds of the night. He stood there, bringing all his thoughts to the present, until fear let go of his heart.

Before the first light of dawn had brightened the horizon, he went to Val's room and roused him with a whisper.

"Let's go!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Eina

North-east of Laeden and slowly rising northwards with the land was a vast region covered with ancient forests. How vast, though, nobody really knew, for it belonged to no kingdom save for a thin strip along its southern edge, which was now, unofficially, part of Astur. The forests were the home of an old race which had inhabited them long before the first Man arrived in those lands. The Eina were a peaceful people, leading a simple life of harmony with all living things, which to them meant not just creatures, but anything that grew. They lived in tribes, but were not nomads, though they did not claim possession of the land either. Instead they viewed the forest as a host, feeding and sheltering them, and themselves as guests, equal in rights and importance to any other being. Theirs was only that which they created.

They did not grow their food, for there was enough there to feed all creatures, large or small. Roots, herbs, nuts and fruits were in plenty, and so were birds and animals. Skilled hunters with the bow or knife and capable of stalking their game through the thick of the forest, they never killed more than they could eat and seldom needed to do so in defence. And when they killed, it was always swift, so their prey would not suffer pain or fear. Taller than the average Man, slender and nimble, they moved with ease and speed in places no one could keep up with them. They were agile climbers, very knowledgeable about plants and animals, and gifted healers.

When the Man had settled in those parts, the Eina had met them with open hearts and had treated them with kindness, in the same manner they had always treated living creatures. Greed, selfishness, envy or deceit were unknown to them. Rivalry and fighting, either for food or a mate, may have been natural for many of the forest's inhabitants, but had no meaning or purpose among them. So when the king of Astur, the rising kingdom at their borders, had set out to conquer the southern tribes—for he thought them to be a weak, primitive race—he had taken them by complete surprise. They had tried to protect their home, but such was the peaceful, caring nature of the Eina that they stood little chance against the numbers and brutality of the enemy. At last they had fled deeper into

the forest and, with no one to oppose them, Man had claimed those lands and had ravaged their home. But their beloved forest, injured as it were, had come to their aid, for soon enough the Man had begun to fall, one after another, until, in a matter days, half of the enemy had been poisoned or harmed by things unseen and unknown, despite all efforts from their own healers. And when the king's own sons had fallen sick, he had finally given up his conquest, terrified by the strange power of that place. He had promised to let the Eina return to their home and way of life, in exchange for their help to save his sons and stop whatever was claiming the lives his people. They had reached a truce which had lasted ever since, for no king had wished to repeat the mistake. With time they had been absorbed into the kingdom, if mostly in name, since they kept living the same as before. But there seemed to be no desire to push Astur's borders further—the forests had proven too wild and strange, dangerous to exploit and impossible to control—nor to forcibly assimilate the tribes. Things had settled into a curious, but altogether peaceful coexistence, where they traded knowledge and learned from each other, without mingling or changing their ways.

All was well for a while. The Man realized the Eina were not so different from them, that they were intelligent and their simple living was not a limitation, but a conscious choice. Their gentle nature was appealing and their healing skills were in demand. Until they discovered things about them that were so unnatural, some began to avoid and even fear them. For one, they lived much longer. With an average life of two hundred years, some reaching as much as two hundred and fifty, they had twice the lifespan of Man. They also shared an unusual bond with the forest and all its inhabitants, so much stronger than what the Man were accustomed with it defied their understanding. But the strangest of all were the children. The Eina were born without gender—which was inconceivable—and lived that way until around the age of fifteen when, through an ancient, secret ritual, they became either boys or girls. It was such an extraordinary, disturbing attribute that it took many Man generations, and a great deal of patience and kindness on part of the Eina, for them to accept it, not as something natural or right, but at least as something less appalling, which they could tolerate. Fortunately the infamous state lasted a very small fraction of their long life, but during that time Man would not allow Eina children around their own.

Even after many generations there were some who feared them without ever

meeting one, but not all Man were so simple minded. Those who had settled along the forest edges were in good relations with the tribes and engaged in trades, as it usually happened along peaceful borders. Many scholars and travelled people, even the kings, took a great interest in them, acknowledging their uniqueness and complex understanding of the world. Though their impressive healing skills seemed connected to that bond they had with living things, some physicians thought their practical knowledge was valuable and within Man's abilities to learn. But there were still voices who deemed them a latent danger for the very same reasons, despite their cordial nature, so the kings kept a watchful eye on the tribes.

* * *

The Eina may have kept to their home, but word of them had spread far and wide, even to the neighbouring countries. Travelling folk sometimes told fantastic stories about them, whether they had seen *the forest people* themselves or not. But such is the fate of all fantastic stories, that the older and farther away from the source they get, the more extraordinary and hard to believe they become, so for many people outside Astur, the Eina were just a legend. That being said, it was not unexpected that a scholar from Laeden would set forth on a long journey to find the truth. Or so an educated person would think, but people generally had a different opinion. They thought the stories were absolute *hogwash* and his quest a regretful waste of time and money—‘*at your age, you ought to use them to build a family,*’ they said—and seemed more concerned about that than about his decision to make the long, perilous journey alone. But Valan Breen could not care less about what people thought. He had heard about the old race and had worked hard to save money, so that he could see it with his own eyes.

Months of work and weeks of travel, which had taken a toll on him, were almost lost when, just as he reached the famed lands, he was ambushed, mugged, beaten and forsaken at the edge of the forest. It was a cruel irony that he had arrived so far without any harm, only to fail miserably at the end of the journey.

And not even meet those whom I came looking for. Life has such a twisted sense of humour, he thought with disappointment, lying face up in the grass and barely breathing.

He managed to crawl as far as the road, but he was exhausted and his body was throbbing with pain. He could not go any further. They had taken his horse—poor animal, he had grown fond of it—his travel bags with food and water, his coin purse, everything. Gone. *Not everything*, he remembered. “Idiots. They didn’t check the boots.” Good thing his boots looked so worn and unattractive. He laughed and felt a sharp stab in the side. Then again when he took a deeper breath. *Bastards, they broke my ribs*. What else? He tried to clear his mind. His hands were fine, save for two broken fingers, as were his legs and the rest of his body, although he expected ugly bruises everywhere. His head hurt and he tasted blood in his mouth. “Oh, Master Breen, what made you think you can fight back? You’re a scholar,” he reproached himself, imagining the pitying looks of those who had tried to convince him to give up his quest, if they saw him in that condition. Yet it was better than he first thought, though he was still in trouble. The sun was going to set soon, he was too far from the last settlement he had seen and had no strength to walk, anyway. The odds were not in his favour and for the first time in his life the young, stubborn man with a quick mind, who used to think any problem has a solution, had no idea what to do. So he lay on the side of the road, his body growing numb, his thoughts hazy, until he slowly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Or perhaps unconsciousness.

He opened his eyes surprised to be alive. He was lying on a soft bed that smelled of grass and there was a roof above him. A strange, round roof, the sort he had never seen before. Slender, radial beams were gathering at the top in a swirling motion, where the structure closed with a small, flat ring. On top of them were layers of branches intricately woven like a net and... he could not say what was on top of those. He closed his eyes, trying to collect his thoughts. He had been robbed and beaten and abandoned to his fate. Had he been rescued? Or was this just the hallucination of a delirious, dying mind? He knew, had seen that some people hallucinated in the last moments, before life left them, and whatever they saw or heard seemed real to them. But his mind was obviously working, as were all his senses. He opened his eyes again, half expecting—

fearing—to see a darkening evening sky. Yet there were beams above him, and a net of branches and whatever else was beyond them. *So I'm not dying.* He pushed himself up gingerly to take a better look—the pain was real, though far less intense than he had expected. The room was round and no wider than ten feet, perhaps, with white walls and timbered floor. There was a recessed door in front of the bed and a small window on one side, covered with a plain curtain which filtered the daylight, but hid the outside from his view. Other than his bed, a small chest and a stool, there was no furniture, nor was there room for it. His clothes had been washed and lay folded at his feet, his small coin pouches—the ones his robbers missed, he remembered—on top of them. Indistinct sounds came through the window, birds and people voices, but they seemed muffled somehow. Was it morning or afternoon? How long had he been lying in that bed? Where was he? He was considering going back to sleep, inclined to believe this was only a dream, when the door opened quietly and a young woman came in, carrying a cloth and a small bowl.

“Ah! You are awake.” She placed the bowl on the stool and a herbal scent reached his nostrils. “I hope you are feeling better.” She was speaking Asturan in a melodic voice, with unusual inflections. Valan's Asturan was decent, though the language was quite different from Laedan, but he had heard the native accent in the last days. He could tell it was not her language. Which meant... His heart fluttered. Fates of all kingdoms! Could it be that he had found the Eina?

“I am... I think... unless you are just a figment of my imagination... Are you?”

That amused her. “Your mind is still confused, but not that much. You are not dreaming.”

He made up his mind and pushed the cover aside, sitting carefully on the edge of the bed. She did not attempt to stop him. He was wearing a long night shirt and his left hand was wrapped in bandages. *My fingers.* “Thank you! For saving my life... for everything. I am forever in your debt.” He bowed slowly.

“Do not concern yourself with that.”

There was something very gentle and comforting in her presence and Valan found himself staring at her. Indeed she looked as their race was described: tall, slender, fair skinned, handsome. Her dark hair, the deep colour of horse-chestnuts, was pulled back in a thick braid, tied with a green ribbon that matched

her eyes. Instead of the usual dress she wore a plain, long tunic—cut on one side, the front lifted and tucked inside the belt—and tight fitting trousers. She was barefoot.

“How long have I been... away?”

“Three days.”

He blinked surprised. “Only three days? But the pain... I could not move, my ribs were broken, my fingers...”

Her eyebrows raised. “Are you a doctor?”

“Still learning,” he said, a little embarrassed.

“You were lucky,” she said, smiling. And what a tender, sincere smile. “You must be hungry, I will bring you some food.”

It was only then that he realized his empty stomach was demanding attention. “What time is it?”

“It’s well past noon.”

“I think—” He stood up a little unsteady, a hand on the wall to balance himself, but he felt he could move. “I think I can walk. I would like to see this place, if you don’t mind.” He needed to move, to be sure all of it was real.

A noise came from behind the door and a small head peeked through.

“*Manee?*”

“Kiri, our guest is awake, come and greet him.”

The child entered the room, grabbing her arm, quiet and shy like a kitten. His eyes, however, were anything but.

Valan smiled. “Hello, little master.”

“Do you feel better? Manee said you are very sick and you must sleep.” Just like that, without any introduction.

“Kiri!”

“I was, but I feel much better now, thank you,” said Valan, diverted by such candour.

“You must eat, your body needs strength,” said the woman.

She moved towards the door and the child ran out of the room. Valan followed them with slow steps.

They passed into another room that was joined with the first one through a very short, narrow passage. This one was also round, but larger and seemed to be the heart of the household. The floor was a step lower and there was a hole in the

middle of it, like a hearth, and many cushions spread around it, but not much else. The roof had the same round, swirling shape, but it was double: it had a large middle ring and the top was raised to let light pour inside through the opening. Along the walls were hanging many unlit lamps and bundles of aromatic herbs; several passages like the one they had come through seemed to lead to other rooms and a tall door led outside. They went around the hearth and passed into a third room—by this time Valan was beginning to suspect they were all round, individual structures—which had two windows and another opening towards what looked like a kitchen. The windows were wide open and he went straight to one of them, finally able to peek outside through the ivy that was draping them like a shredded curtain. He saw tall, old trees and between them, looking almost like mushrooms after the rain, clusters of round houses, covered with creepers. The air smelled of grass and ferns and... *green*, he thought. Birds were singing in the canopy and he heard people voices again, though he could not see them, nor could he understand their speech. But the sounds were loud and clear, not muffled as when he had first opened his eyes. The woman's voice startled him.

"Please, sit." She disappeared in the kitchen.

There was a round table with chairs in the middle of the room. Valan pulled one and the child took another, staring at him in silence, but without hiding his curiosity. He seemed around nine or ten. Though his limbs were long and thin, overall he was rather small. He had the pale skin of his race—for there was no doubt in his mind, now, that they were Eina—and his hair fell in ruffled waves just above the shoulder. A couple of leaves were still tangled in them and there was a smudge on his cheek, as if he had played outside only moments before they met. He looked like a young version of his mother, except for his eyes: they were slightly elongated and had the colour of dark honey, rich and warm, with a copper tint. The woman returned with a steaming bowl of soup and two, round flatbreads. A delicate, nutty mushroom flavour was rising from the bowl and Valan's stomach growled.

"You should eat slowly," she said, sitting beside her child.

He tried to break the bread, but the bandage on his left hand was hindering and the woman broke it for him. It had a certain sweetness and was softer than he expected. The soup was quite thick and indeed had mushrooms, though not a

sort he recognized, some kind of roots and herbs. It was delicious and filling and he tried to eat as slowly as he could, despite the hunger and his excited state. When he finished everything he felt replete, less weak and eager to learn about the place.

“Do you wish more?” asked the woman, standing to take the bowl.

“It was very good, thank you, but I fear more might strain my stomach.”

She took the bowl to the kitchen and returned to the table, sitting.

“Forgive my rudeness, I did not introduce myself. I am Valan Breen and I have travelled from Laeden with the hope to meet your kin.” He stood and made a polite bow. “Though my long journey did not end as I was expecting.”

“Still, you found us.”

Was it praise or consolation?

“Rather the other way round,” he answered slightly embarrassed.

“Is that important?”

He shook his head.

“I am Arryn, wife of Keryon of the Enma tribe. Our village is but one of our tribe’s. Kiri is a *yanee*, one in-between. He is nine.”

Valan felt a thrill of excitement. So the stories about the genderless children were true! But Kiri looked like any other child his age, and a sweet one to boot, why were people so appalled by his kind? True, now that he took a better look, it was hard to guess whether he was a boy or a girl, but other than that there was nothing unusual about him. *Him?* Or *it?*

“*He?*”

“It’s just a convention. It makes it easier for Man to overlook a *yanee*’s condition.”

“I’m sorry, that was unkind of me.”

Kiri did not seem to mind, he was too busy staring at the stranger in front of him.

“Not at all,” said Arryn, brushing her child’s hair lovingly. “They don’t meet many people outside the tribe during this period, it is better this way. You will be quite a curiosity for them,” she said with a smile. “So, why did you want to meet our kin?”

“I study plants and their medical benefits. I grew up close to the woods and loved to wander them as a boy. My mother knew a little about herbs, but my

father was a carpenter and he wanted to teach me his craft. I had no call for it, though, and my interests were different, so I left to study in the city.” He paused, lowering his eyes. “They both passed too soon and I could not help them.” He looked up. “But I hope I shall be able to do more for others. Helping the sick while earning a living is what would please me most, but I feel there is more to it than treating an injury or preparing medicine.” He felt that statement was arrogant in the presence of these people, and blushed. “I cannot pretend I am searching for something in particular, for that would imply I understood things more than I do.”

“It is a good thing to have a curious mind. But you are young and understanding comes with experience, so don’t feel uneasy about not knowing what you are looking for. As long as you keep looking, the answers will come to you.”

Her words made Valan wonder how old she was. She looked about the same age as him, perhaps younger, but with Eina’s long lifespan, she could have been twice as old.

“They say your kin has an unusual bond with living things. It was my greatest wish to meet you ever since I heard that, I was hoping to be allowed to stay with you for a while and learn. I came prepared to pay for it, but... well, I’m sure you can guess what happened. I have nothing left, save for the small pouches and those just out of sheer luck. And I owe you my life as well.”

“All life is important and our duty is to preserve it. You owe us nothing.”

He felt the opposite, but did not insist. Words meant very little; he would find a way to repay their kindness one day. Right now he had so many questions.

“How did you find me? I thought I was a good way from the nearest settlement.”

“Far enough for you to reach it in your condition. My husband found you lying on the roadside. You were almost unconscious, but he said you spoke when he raised you on the horse. He did not understand your speech. Neither of us did when you talked again in your sleep, save for a few words. You said *Eina* several times.”

“You helped me even though you did not understand me?”

“What difference does it make? Would you not help a sick creature because you don’t understand its tongue? Do you perceive someone only through his

words?”

“Of course not. But I could have been a criminal.”

“Did you kill somebody?” asked Kiri with a serious, fearless face.

The blunt question shocked Valan and Arryn burst into laughter.

“No! Goodness, no! That was just—” What could he answer to that?

“Kiri, Master Breen was just curious, he doesn’t know our ways.” Then to Valan, “We would not have left you to die even if you were a criminal. But we would have taken you to Maelifeld, had we thought anything was amiss.”

“Maelifeld? The town?”

“Yes.”

“I was supposed to spend the night there.” That day he had been closer to his goal than he had thought. How ironic. “I have travelled weeks to get here. Many have called me a fool for taking on this journey, alone, and maybe they were right, though it was not so perilous until the end. But folk in Laeden don’t know much about your kin, some have never heard of you and those who have think you are just a legend. I don’t know anyone who has met you.”

“We keep to our forest,” said Arryn.

“So I heard.”

A butterfly wandered in through the window and, after flying aimlessly around the room, landed on Kiri’s arm. Valan held his breath. Its wings were a dull brown, but when they caught the light he saw tiny golden specks on them. Kiri took it in his palm, blowing softly on its wings to make them tremble and shimmer, and the creature did not fly. It just sat there, until the child raised the palm towards the window and it flew back outside.

“Now I’m not sure what to do. I have some money left, but not much, certainly not enough to go back. My horse and all my belongings are lost.”

“You came here with a purpose, I don’t see why you should give that up. If you truly wish to learn, you are welcome to stay with us for as long as you please.”

“I am most grateful, Mistress Arryn,” bowed Valan, barely able to contain his emotions. “I shall work for my share, whatever is needed. And I hope someday I shall be able to return the favour.”

“Master Breen, you have a lot to learn about us. We are not doing this for payment or gratitude. Our ways and knowledge are open for anyone with a good

heart and a wish to know them. But help is always welcome and, since we don't travel, I'm sure we can learn from you as well."

"Thank you."

Kiri's eyes sparkled. "You will stay with us?"

"So it seems," said Valan, smiling.

"Can you tell me about your home? And your trip?"

"Anything you wish to know, so long as I know the answer."

"Kiri! Kiri!!!!!!" cried a child in front of the house.

Kiri went to the window. "*Ee, mai!*" He turned to Valan hesitating.

"Go ahead," said his mother. "Master Breen already said he is staying. You will have time to talk."

The child grinned, then ran outside to his friends.

"He is lovely," said Valan. His own emotion surprised him.

"He is. And very curious, don't be deceived by his silence. You just met, but let me warn you to prepare yourself, now that you promised to answer his questions."

"I shall try not to disappoint him."

"Keryon will be home later, he is gone to Maelifeld. You can rest until then. I must go out to pick some herbs."

"Would you mind if I joined? A walk would be good. Besides, I'm too anxious to sleep."

"Do not force yourself, it has only been three days."

"Forgive me, you are right."

She sensed his disappointment. "Do you need help changing?"

"Thank you, I think I can handle it." His eyes were bright with anticipation.

"Then you will find me in the kitchen."

The village looked nothing like Valan had ever seen or imagined before. It was not at the edge of the forest as he had thought, but further inside. The forest itself was old and the trees, although some looked familiar, were taller than the ones in his parts. The houses seemed to grow from the ground, covered in vegetation as they were, scattered along winding paths on the gently sloped land, trees—old and young—rising undisturbed between them. Some almost looked like green mounds, hardly distinguishable if not for the doors and windows.

Because of that, and because they were not as close to one another as he was used to, he could not guess their number.

"It is amazing," said Valan, breathless. "I never imagined you could build an entire village without clearing the forest."

"We are but guests here, just like any other creature," said Arryn. "Our presence must not disturb the place, if possible. Long ago, when our ancestors made peace with Astur, they built their homes on the ground because the woods had been harmed by the war. But further north they are untouched and very, very old. The trees are true giants and people still live in houses up in the crowns, as our kin has always had."

"So that is why each room is a separate structure."

"Yes. We can add more if we really must, because we live together, young and old. Our house has fewer rooms than others. Kiri's used to be the room of Keryon's sister. She followed her husband to his tribe, before Kiri was born, just as I did."

"You come from a different tribe?"

"I was of the Niseth, before wedding Keryon. But that is not always the case. Some wed simply in a different village, or even in the same one they were born."

Among the Man it was the same.

Valan paused, not knowing whether his next question was appropriate or not, but Arryn's raised brow encouraged him. "Forgive me, but... I was wondering how old you are."

The woman laughed softly, amused by this hesitancy she had noticed before at his kin. Among the Eina ageing was never a reason for embarrassment, but she had heard that the women of Man were more concerned about it.

"Much older than you, as you have probably guessed by now. But still young for our race. I am six-and-sixty."

"So, if we were to say, for the sake of simplicity, that your age is twice that of Man, would that be the same as three-and-thirty for our people?"

"For the sake of simplicity, yes."

"We are of the same age. In fact I'm older by a year," he said with a sheepish smile.

He felt relieved to see that Arryn found that point of view amusing. For a moment he had feared his joke might seem rude.

There was a large clearing in the middle of the village, with cultivated gardens. Arryn explained him that the vegetables had been brought by the Asturans, since they did not grow in the woods. In time, when the two races had learned to coexist, they started to borrow from one another. A few men and women were working the gardens, talking among themselves, but they stopped when they heard them. They were of various ages, all tall and slender. Like his host, the women wore plain, long tunics with the front tucked inside the belt and fitting trousers. *It makes sense*, thought Valan, *a regular skirt would be cumbersome*. Men's were shorter, just above the knee. Both had thin leather boots, to protect their feet from the undergrowth, and, to his surprise, both wore their hair long—women much longer than men—braided or tied in a horse tail. They greeted them with nods and friendly smiles and two of the women came closer, looking especially pleased to see him, as if they had met before.

"I see that you are finally awake. And looking very well, no less," said one, shorter and, possibly, older than Arryn, in the same Asturan with strange inflections.

"Thank you, I feel much better," answered Valan with a polite incline, a little confused by her direct approach.

Arryn came to his aid. "Master Breen woke up just a while ago, Ethri, but he was keen to see the place. He has travelled all the way from Laeden to meet our kin."

"That is a long journey. I hope you are not disappointed, especially after that unfortunate event," said the second woman in a soft voice. Of all three, she seemed the youngest.

"Not at all! Everything I have seen and heard so far has exceeded my expectations. If anything, I fear I'm too excited for my own good. I ought to have rested more, I know, but I simply could not."

The women giggled pleased.

"Arryn, we should make a gathering soon, people would like to meet your guest. If you don't mind that, Master Breen."

"I would feel honoured," blushed Valan. He did not think he deserved such attention, but feared he might offend his guests if he said so.

"He must first regain his strength, Aneri. He may be anxious to meet you, but

his body is not healed yet. Do not forget your broken bones, Master Breen,” said Arryn in a motherly tone.

“That goes without saying,” agreed Aneri, the one with the soft voice.

Valan thought there was a semblance between her and the other woman, Ethri.

“How long will you stay with us, Master Breen?” asked Ethri.

“As long as my kind host will tolerate me. I came in the hopes to learn from you.”

“Then we look forward to teaching you,” said Ethri. “Do not strain your body, you have plenty of time. That gathering can wait. It was a pleasure finally talking to you, Master Breen.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” said Valan, nodding.

The two women returned to the gardens, where the others were waiting, no doubt curious about the conversation. Arryn turned to him pleased.

“Ethri and Aneri have helped us nurse you,” she said. That explained the familiarity of their address. “Everyone knows about you and is very excited. We have not had a visitor from another land in a very long time. Though I’m sure no one expected such a young one. Do you feel up for a walk in the woods?”

In the golden light of the afternoon her eyes were the colour of moss, the most striking shade of green he had ever seen. Valan was dazzled.

“I should like that very much.”

So he said, but after wandering for a while, so completely engrossed by his surroundings and the woman’s stories he forgot his own state, his body grew tired and began to hurt again. He did not pay attention until it was painful to breathe. Arryn helped him return to the house and watched over him until he was asleep. He could not meet Keryon that evening.

It took a week for him to be able to move around without frequent need to rest, and another fortnight to take longer walks without his breathing growing painful. Which was faster than he would have thought, anyway. Back home it would have taken him at least six weeks to heal. The Eina were indeed gifted. During this time he met the entire family and half the village paid him at least one visit. It was awkward, at first, to be the object of everyone’s attention, but they only wished to welcome him. He had not anticipated such a warm and

friendly reception. Kiri spent a lot of time with him and, just as Arryn had warned, the child discarded the shyness and let his curiosity loose. Despite being rather clumsy with children, Valan found him easy to talk to and very well behaved. They quickly became friends.

At first he did not venture too far into the woods, not after what had happened on the day he woke up. He could not be of much help to his hosts yet, and feared he might hinder them. He did, however, see the village. And it was not as large as it seemed, about thirty or so houses, but in that place it would have been hard to guess its size. It was mid spring, the sunlight sifting through the new foliage was warming the moist soil, and ferns, creepers and a large assortment of plants were thriving on the forest floor. Everything was green: ground, trees and houses. A stream cutting through the village, to the east of the gardens, was the main source of water, but there were also springs around. In a smaller glade, on the other side of the stream, he saw—not without surprise—horses, goats and chickens.

“I would not have thought you raised animals,” he said one morning to Yunal, Keryon’s mother, when she took him with her to milk the goats. She was thirty-five-and-one hundred, but looked younger and stronger than a woman in her sixties in Laeden. Her skin was so smooth and her hair barely grizzled, Valan would have never guessed her age.

“We did not, back in the old age, before the arrival of the Man. Although, up in the mountains, there have always been wild goats and all sorts of birds. These were brought by Man. Our ancestors thought it strange and cruel, at first, to raise other creatures so that they could eat them later. But eggs and milk are good and horses are very helpful.”

“So you don’t eat them?” That was unheard of!

“Not unless we have no choice. We must be careful that they do not breed too much. They are still newcomers to these woods.”

“Back home we have pens for our livestock, otherwise we risk losing them or having our crops ruined. You let yours roam free?”

“What right do we have to stop them?”

“But don’t you fear they might not come back? Or that wild animals might kill them?”

“This is their home and they always come back,” said Yunal. “And wild animals do not come into the village. We respect their place, they respect ours. But we cannot stop them from hunting. If an animal gets lost and eaten, well, that is life. We have enough to share with others.”

“What about the gardens, then?”

“What about them?”

“Don’t they go in?”

“They have plenty of food everywhere. Even if they did, we could not confine them for that.”

The path slowly went down to the stream, where there was a wooden bridge, then back up, winding through the trees towards the animals glade. The water was cool and clear and the banks were covered with ferns and shrubs.

“Are there many wild animals around?” asked Valan.

“It is said there used to be many more, before the forests had been ravaged by the war, and that they fled deeper north. But there are still plenty. Rabbits, foxes, deer...”

“Any, um... big ones?”

Yunal chuckled. “You mean big enough to eat us? Yes. But, as I said, they never come in the village.”

“And if you’re away from it?”

“It is very rare for them to attack us. And we are good climbers.”

“You don’t kill them?”

“Do your goats kill you for trying to eat them?”

Valan burst into laughter, the image was both ridiculous and chilling.

“But I would not advise you to go too far alone,” added Yunal. “Wild animals are not the only dangerous things out there.”

The glade looked almost dreamlike in the morning light. Wild flowers had popped everywhere, opening their small crowns in the warm sun, white and yellow freckles on the green, soft face of the ground. The air buzzed with insects eager to taste them and, up in the trees, birds were singing wonderfully intricate songs. Somewhere a chicken was cackling loudly, as though bragging for accomplishing her duty. A few horses were scattered about, grazing, and in the shade of the trees a dozen goats were resting, ruminating lazily. It was so peaceful Valan felt he could have stayed there forever. Yunal made a melodious,

whistling sound and the goats came running with cheerful bleats, as if glad to see her. They gathered around, eager to be touched, pushing each other and trying to get close to her, rubbing on her legs and licking her hands. She petted each one, scratching their cheeks, heads and backs and talking to them in a gentle, caring voice. To Valan it looked as though she were under attack and, had she ten hands instead of two, it would still not be enough to satisfy their crave for attention. But Yunal did not look troubled, even when she knelt on the grass and they climbed on her back and to her head, nuzzling her face and hair. He was not ignored either and, before he could do anything, they were nibbling at his tunic and trousers. A few more joined them from the trees towards the stream and he found himself surrounded and helpless. There were no goats where he grew up, nor in the city. He knew little about them and their assertive behaviour took him by surprise. Yunal saw his panicked face and started laughing. It was so easy to forget this woman had already lived over a hundred years.

“They like you,” came another voice from the path behind them.

Valan turned to see Ethri and Aneri, both carrying wooden buckets and heading towards them. That first day after he met them Arryn told him they were sisters.

“As food, most likely,” he said, trying to free his sleeve from the grip of a bold, reddish doe. He breathed with relief when they abandoned him for the other two women. “A good morning to you. And thank you for rescuing me.”

“You did look a little lost,” teased him Ethri. “A good morning, Master Breen.”

Such excitement among the animals was probably ordinary, because, just like Yunal before, they knelt on the grass to stroke and scratch them.

“They are very affectionate creatures,” said Aneri, hugging a lovely white doeling that was trying to climb in her lap like a cat. “They like attention.”

“I can see that. Though they only seem to want to chew me,” said Valan, when another one came to claim his fingers.

“You are a new face,” explained Yunal. “It is their way of making an acquaintance. Do you not have goats?”

“Not where I live. I’ve seen some in my travels, but I had no idea they are so brazen.”

“They have their days,” she admitted.

The three women sat down to milk and the does slowly calmed, standing quiet and patient under their hands, the others rubbing gently on them. Even Valan could now touch their heads without fear of losing his clothes. When they were done, each was carrying a full bucket. He offered to help, but Yunal refused.

“You should not carry weights yet. Be patient.”

“It’s embarrassing, I’m a man,” he protested.

The other women giggled.

“Nonsense. You need not prove anything.”

“But I need to do something. I feel useless.”

“You are such a hasty race,” observed Ethri.

“We cannot afford to be otherwise.”

Yunal gave him a long, pensive look. “Perhaps you are right,” she said.

“There are things you can help with. Let’s go back, first.”

They left the glade chatting, followed by a retinue of noisy goats, but when they reached the stream the animals turned back without being told, as if that were as far as they were supposed to go.

CHAPTER SIX

Age-old bonds

“Valan!” A child’s voice reached his mind like an echo.

He raised his head, squinting his eyes to pierce the deep black of the forest, but there was nothing but trees, countless trees wherever he looked. The sun was shining on his face, yet the forest was dark and impenetrable. His body hurt and his breath was difficult. Somebody was rummaging through his things, but he only saw a large back. No, two. A coarse laugh. A swear. He cried at the backs to leave his things alone, but no sound came out of the swollen lips. His limbs were limp. A shadow loomed above his head.

Father?

He was watching him with a disapproving look—*‘what did you leave home for?’* his eyes were asking.

“Valan!” A man’s voice. Where was it coming from?

Countless stars spangled an inky sky, flickering like candles in the wind. But they were not really in the sky and not really stars; their cold light had turned golden and they were swarming all around him. He was alone, but did not feel so. He thought the trees were moving, closing in about him.

“Valan!” Keryon shook him gently, startling him awake.

“What? Oh!” He blinked confused, rubbing bleary eyes. “I must have fallen asleep.” With sluggish moves, he pushed himself to the feet.

The sun had moved lower, dappling the forest floor with golden light, and all the colours had taken warmer tones, as if they were soaked in honey. A couple of dead birds, similar to fowl, only larger and with a dark plumage, were lying on the ground. Keryon’s hand clasped a slender bow and the quiver on his back had a couple of arrows. On the trail behind him Kiri held in his arms some sort of small hawk. It appeared dead, the way it sat still with its eyes closed, but the chest was slowly heaving.

“What happened to it?”

“She broke a wing,” said Kiri, very serious.

“Poor creature.”

“It’s not that bad. You, on the other hand, should not sleep here,” said Keryon.

“Funny you should say that.” Valan smothered a yawn. “I came to look for some wood sorrel, but the abundance of species around here is quite distracting. Then I noticed these.” He pointed to the vines that were creeping on the ground and up the tree he had slept against. Hidden under the bright green leaves, tiny flowers adorned the long shoots like jewels. They were not conspicuous among so many others growing on both sides of the trail, yet the brilliant purple of their petals had caught Valan’s eye. “I know the vines, but I’m not familiar with the flowers, so I wanted to take a better look. I guess the peacefulness of this place is sleep inducing,” he joked, smiling embarrassed by that poor attempt at an excuse.

“Not the place,” said Keryon, kneeling to look at the flowers. “These are not real flowers. We call them *orife*. They make you sleepy and feed on your dreams.”

“They do what?” Valan thought he had not heard well. His eyes moved from the flowers to Keryon and Kiri. The child was idly stroking the wounded bird with his small fingers, completely unimpressed.

Keryon waved him closer and pushed aside a leaf that was hiding one of the star-shaped flowers. “See how it sits? It does not grow from the vine, it is attached to it.”

Valan leaned in to look, suppressing a sudden urge to yawn. The flower stood on a delicate stalk that twined around the vine’s stem like a tendril. It was a parasite. “What are these?” he asked in wonder, feeling his eyelids drooping again.

Keryon stood, pulling him up and away from the tree and the sleepiness faded. “*Feya*. Neither plants, nor animals, but living creatures nonetheless. They are visitors to our world.”

Valan made no reply. He considered himself an open-minded person, but even to him this sounded a bit far-fetched.

Keryon smiled, guessing his thoughts. “Has no one told you about them?”—Valan shook his head and his eyes narrowed with suspicion—“I think you will like this. You may not know it, but you have already seen other feya.”—Valan’s brows twitched—“Let’s go back, it’s growing late. There is much to say about them and where they come from. And my parents know more of the old stories than me.” He picked up the birds he had hunted. “Come, Kiri! We must take care

of her wing.”

“She’s hurting,” said the child with a feeble voice, edging on a whimper.

“I know. We will help her. Come, Valan! Tonight we have wonderful stories for you.”

“So, you met the orife,” said Talian, without much surprise, after Valan finished his narrative. “Beautiful little creatures they are.”

There was an odd sense of relief in his tone—one that Valan noticed in everyone—as if they had been waiting for him to make the discovery on his own. Or maybe he was imagining it. Supper was over—Yunal had cooked a wonderful meal from one of the birds her son had brought home—and they moved into the main room. Talian was Keryon’s father and, like his wife, looked younger and stronger than the equivalent of his age in Laeden. *How does a really old Eina look like?* wondered Valan. Two hundred and something years was a lifespan he could not wrap his mind around. Just as it was impossible to fathom the way their bodies and minds grew and matured. On their first encounter he had correctly assumed Kiri was nine or ten, which meant a yanee grew as fast as his Man counterpart. But he knew Arryn’s age was a little more than twice that which he would have thought, had she been of his own kin, and Yunal looked much younger than Man women half her age. The same applied to men. It was a very strange dynamic and the only answer they could provide was that such was the way they were made.

Talian and Keryon lit the lanterns hanging on the walls. The room brightened and soon a sweet, slightly minty scent teased their nostrils. A familiar sensation of calm and relief spread through Valan’s body. He had felt it every evening, the soothing effect of the herbal oil in those lanterns. It was an amazing remedy against weariness at the end of the day and one of the little things he knew he will miss, for the leaves from which the fragrant oil was extracted did not grow in his land. Everyone gathered around the hearth, sitting cross-legged on soft pillows on the floor. Valan had yet to see a fire burning in that hearth; during the warm seasons there was no need to make one. He could not say why, but he felt it would look different than back home, so he hoped he would stay there long enough to see it. Through the opening in the roof came sounds of leaves rustling

in the evening breeze. Fresh air poured in through the dining room windows, stirring the scents, twirling them around the room and then lifting them to the roof, where they wrestled the cool current before escaping into the forest. The main room was the place where the family assembled to spend time together, sharing news, teaching each other or simply telling stories for their entertainment. It was also the place where they received guests. The women brought cups and filled them with a hot, sapid tea. Herbal brew had never been a particular favourite of Valan's—at home he rarely consumed it, unless he was sick—but in the last couple of months he had grown fond of it. As always, for a time they just sipped from the tea in silence, letting it sink into the body and caress their senses. In the hazy light of the orb lamps, that place had almost a mystical feel.

“*Fenna ya edesti*, or *feya*,” said Talian, staring absently into the hearth, “means *beings between worlds*. Feya are living creatures, much like the ones in our world, yet different in the sense that, although they may look like plants, or insects, or little animals, they are none of those. They are not sentient—not in a way that we can tell, at least—nor do they possess the complexity of the others. In fact feya are so simple the only two things they do is mimic the shape of other things and feed. The mimicry is a form of preservation. They can go as far as imitating inanimate things if that helps them survive and get food.” He emptied his cup and placed it beside him on the floor. His gaze focused on Valan—wise and kind under the thick, arched brows—in the same way a teacher watches his pupil, making sure he pays attention. It had a depth no Man eyes could ever boast. “You find that hard to believe,” he said in an even voice, but to Valan it sounded a little disappointed. Perhaps.

“No.” He lowered his eyes. “Well... yes. I mean I know creatures sometimes pretend to be something they are not, but still... feed on dreams? What plant does that?” He looked the old Eina in the eyes. “More important, what do you mean *between worlds*?”

“Aah! That is what intrigues you the most. I don't blame you, the Man seem reluctant to accept the things they cannot perceive.”

“Please allow me to disagree.”

“Oh? Am I mistaken?”

“No, well, not entirely. Perhaps we do not accept foreign beliefs that easily, but we have our own. Our kin believes the world is governed by all-powerful wills, entities which arbitrate the balance between good and bad, luck and misfortune. In some places they call them Fates, in others they call them Gods. Everything that happens beyond people’s understanding or control—especially the bad—is the manifestation of these wills’ anger or benevolence.” He blushed. “But I’m certain you already knew that.”

“And is that also your belief?”

“...I believe people are unwilling to find fault in themselves. But some things *do* happen without apparent reason. And some *are* beyond our understanding. Though I have seen no clear evidence that the Fates exist, that does not mean they don’t, so I’m neither accepting, nor denying them.”

“Would proof make you more inclined to accept?”

“I suppose yes... it depends on proof.” The exchanges of looks and smiles did not escape his notice. Something seemed to amuse his hosts, though not in a derisive sort of way. Valan watched them uncertain. “Did I say something strange?”

“Forgive us,” said Arryn. “It is just that, concerning our story, you already had proof, but until today you didn’t notice it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Keryon told you about the orife, but you seem to doubt their nature, even though you saw them with your own eyes and felt their influence. Those vines do not flower, as you probably know if you are familiar with them.”

“I thought perhaps I never happened upon one during blooming season.”

“Very well. But there are feya living on your window sill ever since you came here. We put them there, to make the room quieter.”

“So it was not just me... I thought it strange that the sounds in my room were softer than the ones throughout the rest of the house. Even with the window open.”

“When Keryon brought you, I placed a small colony of *nerife* on the sill, to eat some of the noise coming from outside. We never removed them.”

“I feel incredibly tempted to go and see,” said Valan, fidgeting on his cushion.

“If it helps, please do,” Arryn replied kindly. “But they will still be there

when you will retire to sleep.”

Of course, he thought, realizing that such impulsive behaviour was discourteous towards his hosts. After all, this conversation was for him. “No, you are right. I can wait... What do they look like?”

“Like a cluster of spindle-shaped eggs. Or, rather, shells. Tiny shells.”

“I cannot believe I didn’t see them,” he mumbled. “And they feed on sound?”—Everyone nodded—“Are there other, um, feya I have seen but not noticed?”

“*Fuuri*,” remembered Kiri. “The fireflies by the water.”

Valan’s jaw dropped. “Those were not fireflies?”

Kiri shook his head firmly, solemn as a grownup. “Not the silvery ones.”

“Don’t tell me they eat... light?”

“Water.”

“Moisture, to be precise,” said Keryon.

“Let’s take things one at a time, shall we?” proposed Yunal. They were digressing already. “You were right to ask about the worlds, it is where we should begin. Our stories are old, far older than the arrival of the Man, but you will not find them in any books. Man have taught us to read and write, but our memory has not faded and we have kept the custom of passing on the Eina knowledge and beliefs through spoken word. It is in our nature to remember them. If you wish to listen, you are most welcome. And even if what you hear may sound inconceivable, fear not, we will not take it to heart if it does not convince you. For much of it is so old, we have no proof but our own conviction and traditions. What you choose to accept or not is up to your own heart.”

Valan nodded and sat himself comfortably on the cushion. Yunal refilled the cups with tea and handed her husband one, with a silent invitation to speak.

“It is an ancient Eina belief that there is another world besides ours,” began Talian in a deep, gentle voice, in the fashion of the great storytellers.—*Once upon a time...* echoed Valan’s mind and the memory of an old feeling warmed his heart—“*Edesil*, the World of Radiance, exists in the same place and time as our world, yet they are distinct and hidden from each other. They touch, however, in certain places. Places like *Aye-tere*, our Blessed Grounds, but there must be others spread throughout the lands, even in your homeland. It is through those that feya drift into our world, thus the name *between worlds*. Edesil is a

realm of pure radiance, or life force, and every creature inhabiting it is made of radiance as well. We call them *silfen*. Feya are the simplest of silfen and it is for that reason, we assume, that they are able to cross into our world and back.”

Valan's lips moved in silence and Talian bade him to ask his question.

“Has any of you seen this world? Or the silfen?”

“No. We cannot cross into Edesil.”

“Then how do you know it's there?”

“We cannot cross, but sometimes the Eina are granted ways to see it.” Talian raised a hand to prevent another digression. “During our long history there have been a few, a very few, chosen ones that have. But we will get to that.”

Valan's shoulders dropped and he relaxed back, only his cheeks warming up a little. It was embarrassing how the excitement made him act like a child whose curiosity is greater than his patience to listen. Except that he was an educated adult and ought to know better.

“Although they are separate, our world and Edesil exist in a mutually beneficial relationship. They depend on each other in such way that the decline of one would affect the other. The balance between them is what preserves the natural order of things, *Madara*. Edesil is the source of *sidaar*, growth radiance, that is the energy that makes things come to life and grow. We would not be without it. Sidaar flows freely into our world the same way as feya, bestowing life upon and nourishing it. As a result sidaar changes into *sivha*, a form of radiance which the silfen feed on. Feya, for example, gather it from dreams, emotions, warmth, sound and such, for all of them carry *sivha* and—I see you are confused,” said Talian.

“I confess I am.”

“It's the naming that makes Man's heads spin every time, dear,” said Yunal, placing a gentle hand on her husband's. “You are always very scrupulous about them.”

“The names come with the story and that is how it ought to be told,” argued Talian.

“Of course. But for a person unfamiliar with our tongue, it complicates the narrative. Valan, what you must understand is that the relationship between these worlds rests upon the constant flow of radiance between them. It is a cycle. *Sidaar*, the growth radiance, effuses from Edesil into our world, feeding it, and

changes into *sivha*, new radiance, which flows out, back to Edesil. The silfen feed upon *sivha* and change it back to *sidaar*.”

“I think I understand, thank you. But I will write down the names tomorrow if someone will help me. Eli-Talian is right, they are part of the story.”—The old Eina nodded pleased—“But if *sivha* flows back, why do *feya* cross into our world? It seems unnecessary.”

“*Feya* do not make *sidaar*. We think every silfen was once *feya* and that feeding at the source helps them grow and mature, until they reach the stage when they can transform radiance.”

“I see... What kind of world is Edesil? Is it in any way like ours?”

“No,” said Talian, “not from what we know. It does not seem to have the same complexity of structure, nor such variety of forms. Although it would be more appropriate to assume it is because of our limited senses that we think it so simple. We do not really know... What we know is that silfen are conscious and communicate with each other, mind to mind. There is no language. They seem to possess a mixture of individual and collective consciousness, sometimes behaving like a single body, sometimes acting on their own. There is a silfen who rules or... looks after them. *Sireei*, their king. His consciousness is so vast and complex it is beyond our comprehension. The *Sireei* lives about two thousand years and his power and knowledge alone can keep the balance between our worlds.”

“What is the purpose of the silfen, then?”

“*Sireei* is a powerful creature on his own, but he would not reach his utmost potency without the silfen. Collectively they grow his power. The stronger the king, the stronger the balance and his ability to protect Edesil. Silfen flourish when the balance is strong, so they make sure their king is powerful enough to keep it.”

“Edesil seems almost like a hive,” observed Valan.

Talian nodded. “In some ways, yes, though it is much more. Before a *Sireei*’s life comes to an end,” he resumed the story, “a new king is born, the *Vhareei*. The timing is such that the new king has a chance to grow some of his strength before the old one dies, so that the natural order is not endangered.”

“What would happen if the new king would be weak before the death of the old one? Or would die as well?” was Valan curious.

“We do not know, as our lore—as far in the past as it goes—does not mention such an event. But without a Sireei, we think Madara would fall apart. That would harm both worlds.”

“In what sense?”

“Natural disasters, sickness, death. Sooner or later the flow of radiance would stop. Without Sidaar nothing would be born or grow.”

Valan shuddered at the picture. “That would be terrifying!”

“I doubt we would live to see the worst of it,” said the old Eina.

The silence which fell on the room seemed longer and heavier than before. The implications were colossal. Had he thought the answer would be so grim, perhaps he would not have asked that question.

“I’m sorry,” blurted out Valan, with a lump in his throat.

But the eyes watching him, though not smiling anymore, were not afraid. There was peace and acceptance in them.

“Don’t be,” said Talian. “Do not imagine the Eina have never contemplated that, but events of such enormity are beyond anyone’s power to prevent. Everything that is has a beginning and an end. Why would worlds be any different?”

“But, since nothing is everlasting,” added Yunal, “then neither is the end. So the end of something is always the beginning of something new, even if not for us. It’s not so bad if you look at it this way.”

Valan nodded and took a sip of tea, and that calmed him a little. It was then that he realized how much Talian’s storytelling had pulled him in and that, to his surprise, what his mind was dismissing as absurd, his heart was now beginning—or, at least, willing—to accept as possibility. “I interrupted you again,” he apologized.

“It was a pertinent question,” said Talian, “I’m glad you asked it. But you should not worry too much about it. The lore says there have been many Sireei and, if you consider their lifespan compared to ours, you realize the likelihood of such an event is insignificant. Let’s get back to our story.

“The peculiarity of the Vhareei is that, besides the feya, he is the only one who can cross between worlds. In truth we don’t know how or where he comes to life, but it is quite possible that it happens in our world. Because we know he needs to stay here while he grows his power, to replace the old Sireei. It is part

of his... learning, if you wish, of building his *Reeyun*, the bond of the king, that which will help him maintain the flow of radiance and the balance.

“Earlier you asked if we have ever seen Edesil. A few of us have. While in our world, the Vhareei is vulnerable and needs a host, someone akin to a mother, though not entirely the same. Like a baby in his mother’s womb, Vhareei feeds on the *sivha* of his host and grows—in strength, not size—sheltered and undisturbed. He gets a sense of our world through his host’s senses, emotions, experiences and knowledge. He grows together with his host, building his bond. Unlike the baby, he is aware of his needs and his consciousness expands very fast. He chooses his host. And, although vulnerable outside, inside he has the power to protect her, because thus he protects himself and his future. The future of both worlds.”

“Are you saying the host is... a person?”

“Throughout our history several Eina have hosted Vhareei, yes. It is how we learned what I told you so far.”

Valan stared agape. It was the most extraordinary thing he had ever heard. The whole story was mind blowing, but this last bit... there was no tangible proof, yet somehow it sounded so... *true*, his heart whispered. His gaze passed from one face to another, looking for a sign, a hint that maybe this was just a wonderfully imaginative legend, but all he could see was conviction. Not the kind Man had about those higher wills which they could not see—Fates, Gods or whatever names they gave them—but the kind he saw in scholars when they brought evidence one could not argue against. The same confidence. His mouth opened and closed soundlessly. He wanted to speak, but had no idea what to say.

“We know it is hard for you to believe, so don’t force yourself for our sakes,” said Yunal, understanding his trouble. “We are sharing our knowledge, not trying to convince you, and whether you believe or not does not change anything for us. But we appreciate honesty more than forced civility. Don’t forget we can tell what is in your heart even if you don’t say it.”

“That... that’s the problem. My mind says this is not possible, none of it. It’s your belief, and I respect it, but it is no different from claiming that last year’s yield was good because some superior entity felt particularly benevolent towards those who worked hard and paid their due respect... But my heart...” Valan trailed off, with a helpless gesture.

“Your heart tells you it is true,” said Yunal for him. “We can sense that. And it cannot reconcile with your mind. Don’t push yourself, it does no good to be conflicted. Give yourself time, so whatever the conclusion, it will be your own and will give you peace of mind.”

“It is late, anyway,” said Arryn, cradling Kiri, who was struggling to stay awake. The child cuddled in her arms.

Valan raised his eyes to the roof. Against the warmly lit timber, the patch of forest revealed by the opening was ink black and he thought he spotted a few twinkling stars. Or did he?

“We said enough for one day,” agreed Talian, following his gaze. “Do not let your mind linger on it, get some sleep. Tomorrow you will feel better.”

That was easier said than done. Once in his room, Valan went straight to the window and pushed the curtain aside, looking for the elusive creatures that had been living with him for so long without his knowledge. And there they were: tiny spindle-shaped shells, no longer than the nail of his little finger, covering the wood like a fungus, borrowing its colour. No wonder he had not noticed them, they were blending perfectly with the window sill. He hesitantly touched the crust, fearing it might react perhaps, but nothing happened. It felt just as it looked, hard and rugged, and nothing indicated that it was alive. He snuffed the lamp, a little disappointed, and lay on the bed, not knowing what to believe and fearing that sleep will not come to him because too many thoughts hummed in his head like bees in a hive. But he had underestimated the qualities of the Eina’s herbs, because soon his eyelids closed and he sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, after breakfast, Valan went to sit in the animals glade with Kiri. On a trip with Keryon to Maelifeld he had bought paper, ink and charcoal, so he could write down what he learned from the Eina: medicine recipes, plant names and benefits, how to identify, preserve and prepare them, and all sorts of useful things. Now that the wounds had healed, he worked alongside them and they shared the earnings with him. Money was useless inside the tribe, but helpful when dealing with Asturans, for not everything could be bartered. Valan spent as little as possible outside his share, saving the money for the return journey. His friends—for they were not treating him as just a guest anymore—

had reassured him repeatedly that he was most welcome to stay as long as he wished, but he knew he will have to go home one day. Not yet, though, there was still much to learn from them and he did not feel ready to give up the happiness of that simple living, nor eager to return to his former life which, although more crowded and diverse, now felt dull and needlessly complicated.

Leaning his back against a tree, he took out the paper and started making notes about the conversation from the previous evening. Kiri had joined him to help with the names, though it suddenly occurred to Valan that maybe the child did not know how to spell them. *In what language? Do Eina have a writing system? No, no, they must use Asturan for that.* Yunal had said it was the Man who taught them to read and write.

“Why do you have to write things?” asked Kiri, sitting cross-legged on the grass, beside him.

“I don’t want to forget what I learn here. Especially something as interesting as last night’s story.”

“Can you not remember?”

“Usually I can, but there is just too much to learn in such a short time. Do your parents not write recipes or notes?”

“No. If we pay attention, we remember.”

“Hmm... So you never forget?” Valan’s eyebrows arched slightly.

Kiri frowned, disconcerted. “I do... But I ask Manee and she tells me.”

“When I go home, there will not be anyone for me to ask, will there?”

“...No.”

Valan chuckled, amused by the child’s confusion. He had never been one for marriage and offspring, he disliked being tied to a place and had little patience with these small versions of people, whom he found difficult to handle and crying or screaming too much. But one like Kiri, he realized, he could live with. And indeed be quite pleased with it. He smiled at the strangeness of that thought and returned to his notes, while his little companion patiently watched him scribble.

“What was the name for the Blessed Grounds?”

“Aye-tere.”

Valan paused. “I don’t suppose you know how to write that?”—Kiri shook his head—“Never mind, I will ask your grandfather later... Do you—no, never

mind,” he said again and he wrote the word as it sounded.

“Is that your language?” asked Kiri.

“Laedan, yes.”

“Is it very different?”

Valan thought for a moment. Kiri was very young and probably knew too little, if anything, about the history of the Man.

“Quite different, yes.”

“Was it hard to learn Asturan?”

“Um, not really. Though I am not the most talented person with languages. Other people learn much faster and some learn very slow.”

“Can you write in Asturan?”

“Yes. Do your parents?”

Kiri nodded. “Can you teach me?”

“Would you like to?”

“Yes.” Kiri’s face brightened.

“Very well, I will.”

“And Laedan?”

“If you wish,” agreed Valan. “But first, will you help me finish these notes?”

“Yes.” Kiri drew himself closer.

Later on, when they were in the kitchen sorting the dried plants for storage, Valan told Arryn about his conversation with her child.

“You should not have promised him,” she said, with a playful look. “Now he won’t let you off the hook.”

“I don’t mind that, as long as you don’t. I’m sure I can find time for it.”

“Then I see no problem. He never seemed that interested in writing, but then he doesn’t see anyone use it. I guess it’s because he watched you take notes in the last weeks. Such a curious child.”

“I think he is delightful, and I’m not particularly, um, inclined towards children.”

“You mean you don’t like them much,” said the woman, bluntly. She seemed diverted rather than offended. “No one who has seen you with Kiri would believe that, though.”

“Well... I don’t dislike them, but I would rather watch them from afar,”

admitted Valan.

“Keryon will be pleased. Even if it isn’t our tradition, he believes reading and writing are some of the best things we learned from your kin. He would like to see Kiri read books, though we don’t have many.”

Valan remembered the libraries from Ardaena and a fond smile spread across his lips. “It will be my pleasure to teach him... I don’t mean to be rude, but why has Keryon not taken him to Maelifeld? There is a small bookshop, I think the keeper would not refuse to help. People who sell books are bookworms themselves. Always happy to convert a humble mortal to their kind.” All those he knew were like that.

Arryn giggled at such phrasing. “I would agree with you if Kiri were not a yanee.”

“Oh, I forgot about that.” It was not hard to, Kiri was no different than any other child.

“After Becoming there will be no trouble in taking him to town. We will find him a teacher. It’s how we all learned.”

“Becoming?”

“The Becoming Ritual. *Berethis*. We have not talked about it, have we?” realized Arryn, seeing Valan’s confusion.

“No. Please do,” he said eagerly.

“You know the Eina are born without gender.”—Valan nodded—“To us it is natural, because we have always been like this, even though none of the other creatures are. Such a child is called a *yanee*, which means a person between genders. In truth, a yanee is a person with both genders in a latent state. This... stage in our growth lasts until the age of fifteen.”

“That’s quite a long time.”

“Not compared to our years.”

“Of course.”

“Man find it very disturbing and it took many Eina lifespans for them to... reconcile with it. Almost. So we keep the yanee away from Man and their children until after Becoming.”

Valan’s heart stung. How was it possible that these wonderful, kind people were so inclined to love and accept what the Man were so quick to fear and sentence—that is, whatever was unlike them? He felt so ashamed for the

smallness of their hearts, he almost apologized. But he did not, because it would have been pointless. Moreover, the Eina did not seem to resent the Man for their prejudiced minds. Still, it was saddening to realize the difference of character.

"I pained you," noticed Arryn.

"No. Not you."

"Your own people. But don't judge them. We are each made our way. Don't let it trouble you."

"It's unfair. Kiri is a normal child. He is sweet, intelligent and well behaved. How can anyone see him any other way?"

"They don't, not in Maelifeld anyway. But they know what he is and that unsettles them. Don't imagine they chase yanee away, though, nothing like that. It just makes them apprehensive and reserved. It would be distressing to send Kiri to a teacher every week. Both for him and the people from the town. That doesn't mean he has never been there."

"I see..."

Arryn took a kettle from the hearth and poured both some tea. Among the flavours Valan recognized the sweet, slightly apple-like chamomile.

"There are a few more bundles in the main room, can you bring them here? Only the ones who dried completely."

Valan returned with four bundles of plants. One of them was so strongly scented, it invaded his nostrils with a sharp, bitter-sweet smell when they crushed its leaves and small flowers, making him sneeze.

"The bitter thousand-leaf," said Arryn.

"Is this not yarrow?"

"A variety."

Valan grimaced. "They are all bitter."

"This one beats them all. It tastes awful, but it is very potent. It can bring down the strongest of fevers and relieves all sorts of pain, among other things. We gave you some when you were sick."

"Really? Good thing I was not aware, then." They both laughed at that. "You were saying about the Becoming Ritual."

"We call it so, but, really, it is not like any other. It does not involve other tribe members, only the family. When a yanee is in his fifteenth year, his parents take him to one of the Aye-tere."

“The Blessed Grounds.”

“Yes. There are three of them and the trip to the closest one takes a few days. Once there, the yanee must be by himself for seven days. His parents cannot stay with him, but they usually spend that time a day or two away from Aye-tere.”

“You leave the child alone for a whole week? Isn't that dangerous?”

“Why would it be? It is probably the safest place in the whole land, for it is right where our world meets Edesil. The sidaar protects and nourishes him. No creature harms him. It is a place of harmony and powerful radiance.”

“Have you and Keryon been through that?”

“Yes. Every Eina has. It is our way.”

“And no one was harmed?”

“No one.”

“What happens there?”

Arryn's hands paused. “It's difficult to say, because we don't remember much. It is...” Her eyes stared blankly, as if she were looking inwardly, searching through memories. “I remember feeling like being in a cocoon. A warm, safe cocoon... dreaming... I think. I remember peacefulness.” She blinked, returning to the present. “That is all.”

“It's like a beautiful dream you just cannot remember,” came Keryon's voice from the next room, startling Valan. He was standing in the opening towards the dining room, holding a bucket of milk. He placed it gently on the floor and came to their table, picking a few leaves and sniffing them with visible pleasure. “You were talking about Berethis?”

“Yes,” said Arryn, lifting a fistful of crushed flowers to her husband's nose, who smelled them and smiled. “I was telling Valan we don't really know what happens during that week.”

“True. Only emotions come to mind, and even those are just a memory of the emotions of a child. They are quite difficult to put into words. In many ways it is akin to a week-long sleep. Time flows differently: for the parents it is a week of waiting, for the child it feels like a moment. A wonderful moment... Think about how it is when you wake up from a deep, resting sleep, as if you've just closed your eyes and it's already morning.”—Valan nodded, understanding —“Only it's more powerful than that. Like a second birth.”

“That sounds... amazing!”

"It is," agreed Arryn. "After seven days the parents return to find a boy or a girl. And they go home."

"Just like that?"

"Did you expect some kind of ceremony?" guessed Keryon.

"More or less, yes. You call it a ritual."

"It is, for the yanee. He is transfigured, reborn, like a butterfly. Physically and emotionally." Keryon brought a chair and sat, untying another bundle and starting to pluck the dry leaves off their stems. "A Man's child is a small, immature version of an adult, but everything is already there, waiting to grow and bloom. From a young age he or she grows identifying with one gender. You do not realize the full extent to which this influences the emotional and mental growth until you see the opposite."

"A yanee is incomplete. Until Becoming he lacks gender identity. He knows *Manee* and *Danaa* are different, but he cannot identify with either of them. Having no gender or just the potential to be any of them, without actually being one, is the same. The ritual completes a yanee, that's why we call it a Second Birth. For Eina it is just as important as the first one."

"Incredible," was all Valan could mutter. His fingers were idly crushing the herbs in front of him, but his mind was struggling to understand, to imagine what it meant to be a yanee. And it just could not. He had always known he was a man, well, a boy who would become a man. That had given him a place, right from the start, in the... what was the Eina word? Madara? Yes. The natural order. It was a fact that creatures were either male or female. "I heard the Eina were born without gender before I came here, but I didn't imagine... it never crossed my mind... I didn't wonder even for a moment what that really means. Now I can see why you keep them away from Man. Our minds could not grasp this."

"You seem to," said Arryn.

"No, I don't think so. I can understand the implications are deeper than I would have thought but... to me Kiri is still a sweet little boy. In fact I realize I have always seen him that way. I don't think I can change that."

"That is only because we refer to Kiri as a *him*. But I told you, it's just a convention."

"It doesn't matter. If you called a yanee *she*, I would see her as a girl, and if

you called a yanee *it*, I would probably feel compelled to choose a gender myself. Is this not the very reason for your convention?" Valan sighed. "I cannot imagine how Kiri feels about this."

"You have not realized yet it is only you who sees it as a difficulty. We have always been like this."

"I know. Forgive me, but I cannot help it. This challenges an age-old fact... state of things. Intrinsic to us."

"It seems to me you think it is a sad thing for us," said Keryon, serious. "It is not. The Eina were here long before the coming of *Vhana*, the new people. That is, the Man. You." There was no condescension in his attitude, he was simply stating a fact. "Until then we never thought about this difference between us and the other creatures. We are different in many ways, after all. We live longer, we have no fur or feathers, nor fangs or claws. We walk on two legs instead of four and don't have wings. Why would it be unusual that we are born without gender? When *Vhana* arrived, they were the first ones like us in more ways than any other being. Then we learned they live shorter lives, they give birth to boys and girls and are more impulsive and less connected to the living world than us. Our ancestors thought it very strange in the beginning. But all creatures are different and beautiful, why would we see Man otherwise?"

"I see what you mean... Then how do you know about gender identity at young ages?"

"Observation. We watched how Man children grow. And felt their hearts."

Ah, yes, thought Valan, *the Eina bond with living things—Kiyun, the bond of the heart*. He would have described it as a sort of affinity, an ability to sense the emotions of others, though it was much more than that. It was as if they were able to enter the very heart of a creature and *see* what happens there. And *talk* to it. And it seemed that creatures were able to feel them and *talk* back. Talian had said that Eina had always had that ability, and that it was probably an effect of the strong *sidaar* flowing in through *Aye-tere*.

"It crossed my mind, just now, that I have not seen gender roles in the tribe. Is this in any way connected to the way you are born?"

"That is well noticed," said Keryon. "Eina children grow and learn just as fast as Man children of the same age. Since they have no gender identity and no one knows the outcome of *Becoming*, they are not restricted to certain roles, or

forced into patterns through a deliberate, established education. They are all equal. It is something that impresses deeply into their characters, because it happens at a very young age. It is the same as with Man children, only the foundation is the opposite.”

“Physical aspects aside, I feel more inclined towards your way of thinking,” said Valan. “Gender roles, like any other predetermined roles, regardless of origin—social status, family tradition and such—often ruin the greatest potential in a person. Unlike other creatures—and I hope I am not offending any, just because I don’t understand their tongue—we are rational beings, that is, we have the faculty of reasoning. It is our best and most distinctive quality and we should encourage it, not suppress it by forcing us into ill-suited moulds.” His cheeks heated when he became aware of their stares, fearing that perhaps he sounded a little bold in his claims. After all he was half their age and could not equal their understanding. But their eyes were smiling at him.

“Spoken like a wise man!” said Arryn. That only made the heat in the cheeks spread to the whole of Valan’s face. She turned her eyes back to the herbs. “Did you find the nerife?”

Oh, understood Valan. He had not been aware of the tension slowly building in his body. “I did. They blend so perfectly it is no wonder I missed them. I still cannot believe they are not what they seem.”

“Tonight there might be a storm. A thunderstorm,” stressed Keryon, with a tone of anticipation. “If so, you will see something beautiful.”

“Val!” Kiri’s voice came through the dining room’s windows. “Val, come see what I found!”

His parents exchanged amused looks.

Valan relaxed in his chair and smiled. And though he was not certain about those higher powers, he thanked the Fates—or whatever their names—and the creatures of radiance with their king, and whoever else might be listening, for being there, in the midst of the most wonderful people he had ever met.

“I’m coming!”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Unexpected companions

The night was peaceful and the hours passed slowly and without events. They took turns watching in pairs, first Rowan with Owein, then Bran with Bredan and, towards morning, Bert with Glen. Bran had decided to let the other five rest; by nightfall most were feeling considerably better and only one of them woke up, during his watch, to scramble among the trees. But after his turn ended he could not get much sleep anymore. He drifted in and out of it and when it finally came to him, he dreamt of Kiran staring at him silently, exuding a power that froze his body and filled his heart with dread. He watched terrified as Kiran slowly turned into a monstrous creature that loomed over him with a mocking smile. He startled awake with a gasp, his breathing short and his face damp.

Bert and Glen were talking in low voices some distance away and the others were all asleep. Among the trees nearby, the horses were dozing. It was still dark and the stars were bright, but the moons were lower and the sky towards east was turning a lighter blue. In less than two hours the sun would rise. He knew he would not be able to sleep, more so after that dream, and lying there awake with his unpleasant thoughts would only aggravate him. He stood up and went to the stream, splashing his face to chase away the drowsiness. The cold water sent shivers through his body, waking his senses, and he faced the breeze to dry his skin, breathing in the smell of dewy grass. He heard a shuffle behind him and turned to see Bert, who had probably been alerted by the splashes.

"Captain!" whispered Bert, surprised. "Were we being too loud?"

"No, I just couldn't sleep anymore."

They went together to sit with Glen.

"Cap'n! Somethin' wrong?"

"I cannot sleep."

"You worried about catchin' up with the others?"

"Yes. No... I don't like it when things don't go as planned." It was true, but, despite the tense vibration, the statement was reflective, not meant as a reproach. Still, the men lowered their heads, though what had happened the day before was not their fault.

"Cap'n, please don't be too hard on the boys," Glen pleaded humbly. "I know

they were wrong, but they meant no disrespect. They've not seen much of the world outside the city."

"Many of the others haven't, but that's no excuse. You realize this puts me in a bad position as well."

"Why?" asked Bert. "It was their mistake."

"Because he's our Cap'n," answered Glen in his stead. "He's responsible if we step wrong. A Cap'n who can't keep his men in check is no good. He's the youngest of them and some boys think he's got the position because of his father."

Glen was a responsible man, with more experience than the others. It was High-Captain Pryce who had asked him to stay behind with them. Bert understood, though he thought it was unfair. Like his comrades, he knew Bran was the right man for it, that he had risen in the ranks on his own because he had discipline, a sharp mind and strong leading qualities. He also knew he was too proud and principled to accept favouritism. They respected him. But it was obvious the lads had not thought their little morning escapade could have serious consequences, much less that it would reflect bad on their captain. He felt ashamed and regretful.

"I should have tried harder," he apologized. "I told them not to go in those brambles, that we had orders to pack, but I didn't really think they were doing anything that bad. It was close to the camp."

"It doesn't matter, Bert, orders are orders and the harm has been done. I will take full responsibility for it, but I cannot turn a blind eye on their behaviour. It's not about my position, lack of discipline can put us all in danger. You seem to forget where we are going."

It was not hard to. None of them had seen battle and, since nothing had happened at the border yet, there was no sense of real danger. The men were relaxed. Indeed there were stories depicting King Arne as anything from ruthless to unstable to plain mentally ill, and his army an assortment of cold and cunning beasts, but they sounded far-fetched and the reality had yet to confirm any of them. The countryside was peaceful and everywhere people went on with their lives. Drinking was the most common form of recreation; tales and gossip were the soul of a drinking assembly. It was not hard to guess where those stories had emerged.

For soldiers during mission, however, their attitude was inexcusable.

"I will talk to the lads, get some sense into them," volunteered Glen.

"No, Glen, that is my duty," said Bran. "I will not punish them, those stupid berries have done that enough, but whatever their condition today, they will have to bear it. We can move faster than the others and I want to catch up as soon as possible. Perhaps not today, but tomorrow we will. It's the only way to redeem, if only a little, for this mishap and I will not tolerate slacking. This is not an excursion."—The men just nodded—"Besides," he added, "we're short on provisions."

They were silent for a while, sitting on the damp grass, listening to the crickets and the soothing burble of the stream running on its pebbled bed. Every now and then the breeze picked up, sighing through the branches and rippling the grass, wave after wave, carrying fresh scents of wild flowers, then dropped back to a gentle breath. Wispy clouds floated like foam on water, veiling the fading stars. The moons were paler and almost translucent, like wax paper, and on the opposite horizon they could make out the dark outline of gentle hills against the brightening sky. Twilight in the city was never so peaceful, nor so rich. They made no attempt to speak, each lost in his own thoughts, and Bran was grateful for it. The tension had left his body, taking the dark reflections with it, and he lay his back on the grass, hands under his head, eyes closed, abandoning himself completely to the serenity of the place.

A horse shifted his weight, letting out a long, fluttering breath. A tail swished. A man mumbled something and another turned in his sleep. The water was gurgling and leaves were rustling. The crickets chirps were dying down, replaced by the excited, whistled song of the robin. His mind drifted with the sounds, his thoughts thin and distant like clouds, until he slowly slipped into a light, dreamless sleep.

Bert's amazed voice brought him back and he raised his head to see what was happening. Above the distant hills the sky was ablaze and the clouds were trimmed with gold. He propped himself on his elbows and, letting his head fall back slightly, watched the sunrise from behind half-closed lids. He could not help smiling.

"I haven't seen anything like it in the the city," murmured Bert, nearly breathless.

"That, lad, is a proper sunrise," said Glen. "I say we'll have a beautiful day."

With a soft rustle Bredan came behind them, contemplating the glorious spectacle. He looked down at Bran, wondering when was the last time he had seen such a peaceful expression on his friend's serious face. "Weren't you supposed to sleep?" he asked, meeting his eyes.

"I think I just did," answered Bran. He felt relaxed and rested and in a better mood than he would have thought a couple of hours ago. He was ready to face the day.

"Soo... damp grass suits you better than a dry blanket? Interesting."

"Wake the others," cut him Bran, pushing himself up. "We'll grab something and take off. We have a long day ahead."

Bredan wanted to reply, but he noticed something on the road, westwards.

"Travellers this early?" wondered Glen.

There were two riders, trotting leisurely, and the four men waited in silence, squinting eyes fixed on the only moving shapes in the still landscape. As they came closer they looked more familiar and Bran's forehead slowly wrinkled in wonder, recognizing the doctor and his son. The riders waved at them and made haste, leaving the road and coming decidedly towards them.

"Doctor?" asked Bredan, confused.

"A good morning to you, gentlemen," Val greeted them amiably. They dismounted and approached leading the horses by the reins. Despite the hour there was no trace of sleep or fatigue on the doctor's face or in his step. He looked spry and in great spirits and there was a playful spark in his dark eyes. His son seemed less cheerful; he greeted them only with a silent nod.

"A good morning, Doctor," said Bran. "It is awfully early for a stroll." He had noticed the travel bags on the horses.

"I'm an early bird," said Val with modesty.

"Where are you heading?"

"East. As a matter of fact I wanted to see you, Captain. Could we have word?"

"Glen, Bert! Get everybody up and ready to leave. Have them eat something and refill the skins. Mind the food, we don't have much." Some of the soldiers were already awake, roused by their talk.

"Yes, Captain."

Bran waited for them to leave, then turned to Val with a questioning look.

“How are your men feeling?”

“Much better, thanks to you. I really appreciate your help, Doctor,” said Bran—and he meant it—but he felt the peaceful mood slipping away in the presence of his visitors, particularly Kiran's. He remembered his dream.

“Do you mind taking a few steps?”

They left together. Kiran stood a few paces away, holding the reins and looking a bit nervous. He followed them with his gaze, eyebrows gradually coming together, lips sealing tightly. Bredan studied him for a few moments, watching the emotions that were passing over his fair face like ripples on the surface of water. Truth be told they were not quite that obvious, but his eye had been trained from childhood to read people's faces.

“It's good to see you again, Kiran,” he said in a cordial tone, trying to ease the young man's tension.

Kiran turned his worried look towards him and forced a smile. He looked much younger than them. “Good morning, Bredan.”

“So you remember my name, after all.”

The smile tilted. “I never said my memory is bad. It just seemed an unnecessary effort.”

“Point taken,” conceded Bredan, amused by his honesty. “Do you travel often?”

“More often than you, probably.”

“That would not be too hard. We are bound by our duty to the Royal House. Some of these boys have never stepped outside Ardaena.”

“I could see that,” replied Kiran with an almost mocking upturn of lips, looking towards the soldiers they had helped the day before.

Bredan followed his gaze and smiled. “So, is this a business journey?”

There was a brief hesitation. “Yes.”

Bredan waited, but Kiran did not say anything else. He looked again in his father's direction. They were talking in low voices and he could not understand a word, but he could watch them. Val's demeanour was confident and relaxed, he was looking Bran in the eye and his hands were resting on his belt, occasionally making slow gestures. The captain had not donned his usual stern look, but his posture had become more rigid and, being a full head taller than Val, he looked

imposing and difficult to win. At one point he crossed his arms over the chest, pushing it slightly forwards. That was not a good sign. But a few moments later they turned to face east and Bran pointed in the distance with a casual movement, as if explaining their route.

"Your father is a very persuasive man," observed Bredan. It almost sounded praising.

"Excuse me?"

"Whatever it is that he wants, it did not take him too long to convince Bran."

Kiran was confused, not knowing how to interpret the man's words, nor his ambiguous look—was he impressed or ironic?

"It appears to me that we are going to travel together for a while," clarified Bredan. "How far are you going? Keln?"—Kiran stared perplexed—"Damerling? Fiodhin?"—His lips parted—"Fiodhin."

"Are you reading lips?"

Bredan burst into laughter, the same boisterous, infectious laughter that had brought a smile to his face the last time they met. "That is my secret. But don't worry, I'm not going to use it to learn yours."

Kiran's eyes narrowed only slightly, but then they looked over Bredan's shoulder at the man coming towards them.

"What's happening?" asked Bert. "Are you not coming to eat something?"

"Is everyone up?"

"Up and ready."

"Horses?"

"Watered, just need tacking up. We were waiting for you and the Captain."

"Go ahead and eat. We'll be with you in a moment."

"Yes. Hello Kiran."

"Bert," said Kiran, nodding.

When Bert was gone Bredan turned back to him. "You do have a good memory."

"We met only yesterday," he scoffed.

"True, but you remember me and Bran from Ardaena. That was a year ago."

How did he...? This man was strange. He acted so friendly and open, but his words and look seemed to have double meanings. He would have to be careful.

"Please, there is no need to be so guarded," said Bredan, "I was just teasing

you. As a matter of fact I like you.”

There it was! That genuine, friendly smile, again. So deceiving.

Val and Bran were coming back and, to Kiran's surprise, none of them seemed too nervous or concerned. Not even *Grim-face*, which was curious, to say the least.

“We shall ride together,” announced Bran.

“I guessed that,” said Bredan, glancing towards Kiran.

“Are they all up?” asked him Bran, looking towards his men who were having a hurried breakfast.

“Yes.”

“Would you like to join us, Doctor?”

“Thank you, Captain, but those are your provisions. As I said earlier, we shall not trouble you. We came prepared. But I would like to check your men before we go, if that is fine with you.”

“Certainly. And thank you for that.”

The news took the soldiers by surprise, but none appeared to be unhappy about it. The five convalescent seemed rather glad to have a doctor amongst them. They were obviously better that morning, especially since they had been exempted from night watch, but being city folk they probably feared other effects of their ill-fated adventure. After a brief check Val assured them they were going to be fine and half an hour later they were on the road.

They started with a jog to warm up the animals, riding in pairs. The captain and his friend were leading and Glen closed the column with Bert and Rowan. Val and Kiran were riding in front of them. Less than two miles further they passed through a small village and after that they picked up the pace, settling into a working trot. The meadows were replaced by crop fields, where people were already up and working, their carts pulled on the side of the road, at the edge of the fields. The rolling clapping of hooves made them stop and turn heads, following them with curious eyes and hushed words, seeming to wonder about their small group when a larger company had already passed the day before. They paid no heed to them and pushed on, concerned only with the road and catching up with the others. The sky was promising a beautiful day and the sun was not hot yet. The land opened before them and the road was dry and

good, cutting its sinuous way through fields, pastures and settlements. After a few more miles they slowed down to a walk and there were some changes in the formation. Some pairs shuffled and Bredan came to ride alongside Kiran, while Val moved to the front because Bran wanted to talk to him.

They said nothing for a while, Kiran still a little tense after their uncomfortable exchange earlier, but eventually Bredan broke the silence.

"Would you say now is the right moment for introductions?"

Kiran puffed, amused despite himself. "You have a fixed idea."

"It's nice to know the people you meet. It's better to know those you travel with. Learning their names is a good start."

"I suppose in our current circumstances it makes sense."

"I'm glad you think so. Which ones are you acquainted with?"

Kiran relaxed his back a little and searched around. "The ones behind Bran are Cai and Owein. Cai is the skinny one."

"But never call him so. He is stronger than he looks, and clever."

"He ate the berries."

"...He has an inquisitive nature."

"Ha! What about Owein?"

"He is a good man. Just a bit... innocent. He and Cai are close."

"I noticed."

"You did?" Bredan sounded impressed.

"Behind me is Bert," said Kiran, ignoring the question.

"Bert is a reliable fellow, very level-headed for his age. As is Glen, the bearded one in the back. The oldest of us and the only one married."—Kiran turned to look behind—"The ginger lad with him is Rowan. He is the youngest. Odd pairing, I know," said Bredan in answer to his raised eyebrows. "Glen has a fatherly attitude towards the younger ones, though he is not old. Perhaps because he has a son. In a way he looks after Rowan."

"Troublesome lad?"

"Just eager. He is inexperienced."

Right, remembered Kiran. He was the one who had asked him about the use of charcoal and—he bit his lip.

"The big one behind Cai is Rhun. The most quick-tempered, especially after a few drinks, but otherwise friendly. You can count on him. The blonde fellow is

Toph. A bit self-absorbed, he loves to talk about his many conquests. At least he doesn't lie, women line up for him."

The man had indeed a handsome profile. Not to mention ladies fancied blonde hair. Kiran turned his gaze upon Bredan. He too was fair haired, though his was a darker shade, and the jade eyes had not escaped Kiran's attention, nor did the finely chiselled bones. He had noticed them the day before, just as he had noticed Bran's noble features, only he never cared for such things. Now he smirked. "And for you?"

"I prefer to keep that private."

"You seem to know a lot about people, but I get the impression people don't know much about you."

"I cannot imagine why," said Bredan with a sly smile, revealing white, even teeth, with a small gap in the front.

Kiran reminded himself not to let his guard down in front of this man. His senses told him he was a good person, but more complicated than the others. "Who is in front of me?"

"Ceri. Don't let his quiet air fool you, he is shrewd and quite ruthless sometimes. Next to him is Anwyl, the entertainer. He has a gift for storytelling and a pleasant voice... They are very different, but they are good men and work well together."

"How long have you known them?"

"A few years. Rowan is the newest, he came about two years ago."

"What about your Captain? What sort of person is he?"

"The best sort, once you get to know him."

Kiran shot him a long, disbelieving look and his face writhed, unconsciously, in a repulsed grimace.

Bredan chuckled. "You don't like him very much."

"I think it's safe to say the feeling is mutual."

"... You may have rubbed him up the wrong way that evening."

"You don't say!"

"Not on purpose, I'm sure." Bredan's eyes said otherwise.

"Of course not." It rang untrue and Kiran knew it. He had made no effort of civility towards Bran, not after him being sarcastic. *That was his fault.*

"He is not the easiest person to deal with, until you win his trust. But he is

not as severe as he looks.” Bredan glanced towards his friend—he was paying attention to whatever it was the doctor was telling him. He turned back to Kiran, very serious. “Bran is one of the most principled men I have met.”

That was so unexpectedly honest, and in such opposition with his own feelings, Kiran could not help himself. “That is a remarkable statement.” There was a mocking edge to his words which he did not even try to hide.

Bredan opened his mouth, but the men in front took off at a quick trot. “You’ll see,” was all he could say, before the noise drowned their voices.

I won’t hold my breath.

They rode like that for the rest of the morning, with a couple of sprints and short periods of walk to wind down the animals. But other than a break for water and fodder, they kept them moving until midday. They were strong, endurance horses and Kiran could feel their enjoyment with the exercise. During walks the men took the opportunity to chat among themselves and they tried to pull him in. He would sometimes answer, out of courtesy, but for the most part he preferred to keep to himself. He was comfortable with long rides, but usually it was just him and his father. Never before had they travelled in such large company and he liked it that way. Val did not return to his side. He and Bran seemed to get along and the surly captain was more relaxed than in the morning. His seat was straight and tall, but not rigid, there was no stiffness in the level line of his shoulders and his occasional gestures were natural. Val had an unaffected, pleasing manner and his conversation was intelligent and effortless, particularly when he respected his interlocutor. Kiran imagined he could speak to the king himself and manage to hold his attention, without losing composure. He almost envied that in his father. It was not as if he were awkward with people, in fact he enjoyed talking to them when they were not stupid or nosy, but... well, had it not been for that evening in Ardaena, he would have felt less uneasy and more inclined to converse.

That was not the only reason for his unpleasant mood, though. There was also that dream. That horrible dream he had that morning and which had pushed him to make up his mind about the journey. Kiran had had strange dreams and nightmares for years. Some felt foreign, as if they were not his—he and Val had tried for years to understand their meaning—but some were coming from the

depths of his own consciousness, fears and shards of memories his mind was fighting to forget. It was not the first time he had had that sort of dream where he was trapped in the darkness of his room, unable to run or cry for help, a sense of great danger taking hold of his heart. They were all the more terrifying as it always felt as if he were awake. When he was still a little boy Val had been there to wake him up and chase his fears away, holding him tightly until he stopped quivering, but it was many years since each of them slept in his own bedroom. Since then he had learned to recognize the nightmare from the inside, forcing himself awake before it was too late, but sometimes he failed... That man frightened him beyond words. At first he had not known who that was, but now he was almost certain, even though he was just a dark, faceless silhouette. With something shiny on his finger, red and golden, like a ring. Surely that could only be...

Kiran gripped the reins tighter. He would have preferred to be alone with Val, but since he had agreed to this, the fast pace suited him. Of course it would have been even better had Bredan gone back to his captain's side, but he did not, although he did not try to press him to speak either.

"Have you been to Fiodhin recently, Doctor?"

"Valan, please," said Val. "Not in the last years, no."

"You did not pick the best moment to visit."

"It cannot be helped, Captain. I have a friend who needs my assistance... It also happens to be the perfect time for harvesting healing herbs."

"Perhaps. But it is not a good place to be right now."

"The woods around Fiodhin are splendid. There are species of plants that grow mostly in those parts. Since we must be there anyway, it would be a waste to forgo such an opportunity."

Bran turned to him with a quizzical look. "Do you always go to such lengths in your work?"

"Knowledge does not come to those who sit comfortably at home," said Val. "You must search for it."

"Do you search a lot?"

"...I have seen many places. Both of us have. We spend half of the year travelling."

"That must be interesting," said Bran.

Val thought he heard a hint of regret. "It has its ups and downs. It certainly is not for everybody... Would you like that?"

"I have my share of travelling. It comes with the duty."

"I was under the impression you are not accustomed to the countryside."

"Most of these men are not. Given my position, I had more opportunities to travel than them."

"Ah, yes, of course."

"Do you ever go to the capital?"

There was a brief pause before the answer—Bran thought it was hesitation, but Val's tone did not change. "Quite often, actually. We need certain supplies for our work. But we also supply others. You see, the advantage of travelling is you come across a lot of things you do not find at home. In our case it is mostly medicine ingredients. Most apothecaries will not do that themselves, so they rely on those who are willing to make the effort in their stead. It is part of our business."

"I see."

"I spent many years in the city when I was young. I learned my trade there. Ardaena is like a second home to me."

"And your son? Does he always join you?"

There may have been a subtle smile in the crinkled corners of Val's eyes... perhaps.

"Of course. He cannot learn otherwise... I'm not saying this because he is my son, but he has a natural talent for this work. And he loves it, which is just as important. Do you not agree with that?"

"It is certainly a desirable condition for any kind of work. Not many are so fortunate, though."

"Would you have preferred to do something else?"

Bran's eyebrows rose a little. "I was not speaking about myself."

"Then I apologize, it was presumptuous of me."

"Not at all. It was my own choice to become a Royal Guard. It's in the family, just like with you and your son... Though I never imagined things will come to this." That brought their thoughts back to the present. "You said the road is this smooth for the whole day?"

“If memory serves me, yes... I thought you have been to Fiodhin before.”

“We took a different route. Let's take advantage of it.”

He spurred his horse and they sprung forwards into a canter, his men following with elated cries.

Roughly around noon Bran decided it was time to take a proper break. They came across a well and halted, dismounting and stretching their stiffened bodies. Cai, Rhun, Toph, Ceri and Anwyl, the ones guilty for the delay, seemed happier than the rest to feel the ground under their feet. The weakness in their stomachs was not completely gone, but they did not dare complain—their captain was in a good mood and better he stayed that way. They unloaded their mounts to give them a bit of freedom and hurried to draw water. There was a trough on one side of the well, empty but not dry—*A good sign*, thought Bran—and the horses went straight to it. They filled that one before drinking themselves. The water was cool and tasted pleasant. It would have been great to find some shade, but there were no trees about, only a couple of solitary blackthorn shrubs whose shadows were too small to make a difference. On the left side of the road the barley was ripe and golden, on the right the mown grass had been left to dry. There was indication of recent passage of a large number of equines, strips of ground where the hay was gone or patches of yellow stubble where the barley had been cut. And, of course, other typical signs a healthy, responsible horse would leave in its wake.

“They took a break here,” said Glen.

Resting in the sun was not ideal, but, alas, they had no choice. Their four legged companions needed that break more than them; to keep a fast pace they had not allowed them to graze during the walk. They gathered armloads of cut grass and placed them near the trough, so the horses would not wander away to feed. Then, for lack of something better, they slumped on the dusty grass that fringed the side of the road, taking out the bread and cheese. It was as warm as on the day before and far too warm for that kind of ride, with barely a few clouds in the sky and no wind. They were sweating heavily under the thick uniforms. It had not seemed that bad while on the move, but once they stopped there was no breeze to dry their faces or cool the heating breastplates—“Why do we have to wear these blasted things on the road?” grumbled Rhun—and the discomfort

spoiled what little appetite they had. The air was perfectly still and the fresh water had only made them sweat more. There would probably have been more complaints if not for Bran's severe looks. So for a while they nibbled in silence.

"How far do you reckon we've come, Captain?" asked Owein when they were done, squinting his eyes.

"Our speed was good. We passed the third camping point and it's only midday."

"At this pace we could catch up tomorrow morning," said Bredan.

"Why not tonight?" asked Rowan.

"We should slow down," said Bran. "It's fairly hot and harder on the horses."

"No more gallop?" The boy sounded a bit disappointed. It felt great, that rush of excitement, the speed, the wind on his face.

"Not today. It would be another thing if we were close to Fiodhin, but we still have more than a week on the road. Think about your horse who's doing all the effort."

"But we barely started!"

"Precisely. Would you rather end up walking?"

The others snickered, nudging him, and Rowan pouted, but did not argue. Kiran hid a smile—the boy was still green.

Bran produced a map from his pack and unrolled it on the grass. They gathered around him to look and he traced the road with his finger from a point that had been marked on it. There were other marks, fairly evenly spread along the road.

"That where we slept last night?" asked Glen.

"Roughly."

"And these?"

"The camping places."

"We passed the third, so we should be somewhere around... here?" estimated Bredan.

Bran paused thoughtful, studying the lines and scribbles on the paper. "There seems to be a suitable place to camp before this village." He raised his eyes.

"Doctor? Do you remember this?"

Val came closer to look. "Hmm... I'm not sure, but if the map says there is

water, then we can spend the night. Chances are we shall find trees, at least for shelter, if not to light a fire.”

“Then we shall stop there.” He looked at his men, his lips curving up a little. “We’re doing well.”

“Captain, may I say something?” Val had not interfered until then.

“Please.”

“We stayed too much in the sun and I fear the heat might start to affect some of us. We ought to leave.”

Rowan was slightly flushed and some of the five were beginning to look drowsy again.

“Let’s put these back on the horses and move,” said Bran. “Make sure the water skins are full.”

They hurried to pack. However hard on the seat and back a long ride was, it was preferable to lying there, boiling in their sweat, unable to eat or rest properly. They washed their faces and necks before filling the skins. Val gave them a sip of tonic—it was bitter, but no one complained—and they took off at full trot, to get rid of the languor which was threatening to take hold of their muscles and even their minds.

“Val, how did you manage to convince Bran?” asked Kiran in a low voice, when they slowed down, settling into a smooth walk.

“I told him he could use our help to make sure his men are in good physical condition when they meet their company... I don’t know much about military discipline, but I’m pretty sure what they did disregards a few rules. He will probably answer for that. Imagine what would happen if the men still showed signs of sickness.”

“That’s it?” asked his son with disbelief and a definite trace of disappointment in the voice.

“That may seem little to us—we only have to answer for and to ourselves—but it’s very important to them.”

Kiran still could not believe that was reason enough for that stubborn man, though perhaps he would have accepted it, had Val’s expression been less amused or satisfied. But he was not even making much effort to hide it.

“I may have also told him that he needs not worry about payment, neither for

yesterday, nor onwards,” admitted Val, when his son would not spare him the scrutinizing look. “Given the circumstances it would be inconsiderate of us to charge for our services. In fact it is our pleasure to help in any way we can.”

“Pfff!” Kiran stifled a laugh. He knew there had to be something like that.

“Besides, compared to them, I am fairly acquainted with this road.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“Four years is not *that* long,” said Val, a little offended.

“Four? That was Keln. I thought you were talking about Fiodhin.”

“We haven’t reached Keln yet, so that stands.”

“What about after?”

“Let’s get to that point and we’ll see... First of all, I took this road *all the way* to Fiodhin, more than once. Last time it was eleven years ago.”—Kiran winced—“Granted, it may look a little different after a decade, but I’m sure I’ll remember those places once I see them again. Secondly, it is not decided that we shall ride together to our destination. Understandably, it is not up to Bran to make the decision. I told him we are aware of that.”

“So he only agreed with our presence as far as meeting their company?”

Val nodded. “Beyond that it depends on his superior.”

“And do you think you can convince him?”

“I don’t know, we haven’t met the man yet.” He searched his son’s face for a moment—*Then what was the purpose of all this?* he seemed to ask—and smiled reassuringly. “You worry too much.”

On the second half of the day they mostly walked, occasionally spurring their horses to trot, for a change of pace. And, despite what he said during the break, Bran allowed them to gallop for a mile, just to raise their spirits. The landscape did not change much: corn and barley fields, some still waiting to be harvested, endless meadows, solitary trees and villages of various sizes. Every time they met people, be it farmers or travelling merchants, they were received with the same curious, yet nervous looks and the smiles disappeared from the tanned, tired faces. It was not that people feared or disliked soldiers as a rule, it was the reason of their riding east that worried them. And perhaps the empty patches that appeared overnight in their fields. Seeing the anxiety in people’s eyes only made them aware of their own, so they kept their eyes forwards and pressed on.

It was still about two hours before sunset when they noticed, in the distance, the place Bran had pointed out on the map. It stood out in the surrounding landscape and they barely managed to hold back the joyful cries when they saw the line of trees cutting through the meadows, shading the banks of a stream. It was coming from the north, as most watercourses did in that part of Laeden, running south at an angle with the road. At some point the road also turned south, going alongside its banks, as if pondering how to reach the other side, before turning back east to cross it at the edge of another village. At least according to their map. But they were not going to enter the village and, in fact, their presence could very well go unnoticed, or so they hoped. For some reason they did not feel welcome.

Right where the road changed course, on its northern side, was a sheltered flat of grass and traces of an old fire pit. It looked as if it had not been used recently. The grass was like a soft carpet—not the sort gathered for fodder. The stream was fast and its water clear as crystal. There could not have been a better place for bedding and, with plenty of time to set the camp, search for firewood and, hopefully, light the fire before the sun went down, the only thing they missed more than a warm, hearty dinner was a good pint.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Actions speak louder than words

"Where is Kiran?" asked Bert.

"He was here a few moments ago."

They looked around, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

"Valan," said Bran, "do you know where your son is?"

"Oh, don't worry about him." Val waved a nonchalant hand, placing a few stones on the rim of the fire pit. "He is probably foraging... Dear me, not *that* kind of foraging," he added quickly, when he understood their horrified looks. "He is looking for edible things. Mushrooms, roots, nuts, that sort of things. He does that when we travel."

"But we have food," said Bert, with a sigh of relief.

"I know. It's a habit. You never know what you can find."

"I don't like that he left without a word," said Bran, frowning displeased. "As long as we travel together I want to know where everyone is."

"You are right, Captain. But I'm sure he will be back shortly."

"He should better be, I don't want to blare our presence."

"Please give him more credit," said Val. "I daresay he is the most discreet of us."

Bran was not so sure, his mind going back to that evening. But he made no comment.

As soon as they had arrived, they had taken the horses to the stream, then had unsaddled and had left them to graze. Some had fetched water and others had immediately left in search of firewood. There were enough trees around, old alders and willows, but dry wood had turned out harder to find and it had taken them a while before discovering, further upstream, a bough that had split from its tree—broken, most probably, by a gust of wind during a storm. Freeing it from the tree had been fairly easy, but chopping it into suitable pieces without making a racket had proven quite the challenge. Knives and swords were good enough to chip off small branches, but when it came to the thick parts they had had no choice but to use Rhun's axe. Kiran had been helping all along and they were so caught up in their tasks, no one had noticed him leaving. The sun was

still above the horizon, so light was not a problem. His sudden disappearance was. The doctor was cordial and open, his son not so much. His reserved attitude made at least one of them question his actions, and the longer he took, the more Bran's patience was put to the test.

"Look what I found!" came, at long last, Kiran's cheerful voice from the road.

His face was glowing with childish delight and the folded lap of his tunic was bulging. He knelt close to the fire pit and dropped a fistful of grass and a sizeable pile of mushrooms. Fleshy and brownish, with rounded caps—which widened and flattened on the larger specimens—and thick stems, they looked positively tasty. The men gathered around him curious and excited. They had not expected anything more than a scarce, cold dinner.

Bran's eyes, however, were watching him, not the fare, and they were not smiling. "May I have a word with you?" he asked in a low voice.

The young man's enthusiasm dropped like a fresh flower cut with a pair of sharp scissors. Next to him Rowan caught that and threw him a compassionate look—he had been scolded by Bran before and knew that angry undertone. Kiran stood up with dignity, carefully shaking the dirt off the tunic lap.

Some distance away, so the others would not hear, Bran sized him up in silence. His tolerance had reached its limits and the obstinacy with which Kiran held his gaze was challenging his composure. His jaws tightened, crushing the words that were trying to push their way out, until they were no longer a threat to his self-respect. "Where have you been?"

Oh, that superior tone again! Kiran could not stand that one. But they were a sort of guests, him and Val, so he made an effort to behave. "I went downstream to search for food." To wash, in fact, but that would have sounded pedantic in those circumstances and he did not want to give the captain a chance to sneer at his hygiene habits. He had noticed a few mushrooms and had abandoned his initial plan, going in search for more.

"We have food."

"You have very little. The heat has exhausted everyone, they need strength."

"Nobody asked you to do that."

"I never said they did. And it wasn't just for you."

“...Did anyone see you?”

Kiran jerked back when he understood Bran's thoughts. “You think I stole them from the village? Those are wild mushrooms!” The blood rushed to his cheeks. What had made the man think he could stoop so low? “Don't put me in the same pot with an underbred soldier,” he said in a low, disdainful tone. “I know better than that.”

Bran stiffened and his lips sealed tightly. He cursed the moment his men had disobeyed their orders, leading to their unexpected encounter with Kiran and his father. He cursed the moment his superiors had made the decision to take this particular road to Fiodhin. And he cursed his own weakness, because he realized he, too, was at fault. His anger had no foundation other than his own dislike, but letting his feelings affect his judgement or manners was not in his character. If the Senral saw him... “Our presence should be discreet, so far as possible.” He kept a civil tone.

“We chopped wood. We're making a damn fire!” Kiran threw a hand towards the men moving about the pit.

“It doesn't say soldiers. The fire pit was here.”

“Well, I'm not a soldier. And don't imagine people will not know.”

“Tomorrow, yes. Hopefully not tonight.”

The argument was clearly going nowhere, so Kiran gave up. “I didn't see anyone.”

The sharp eyes searched his face for the truth—*And what else?* wondered Kiran—but, at last, the tension in Bran's muscles eased a little. “Why did you leave alone?”

“Because everyone was busy. And I don't need a chaperone. Or do you think you must keep an eye on us? Is that it?” The captain's silence was the worst answer, because Kiran could not retort to that without the risk of being wrong. Not that he cared about the man's opinion, he neither expected, nor wished to make friends, but to clash from the first day... His gaze turned habitually towards his father for help, but he was busy cleaning the mushrooms. Maybe Val was wrong and riding with these men was not a good idea, after all. Pushing away that feeling he looked back at Bran. “I wanted to help. I thought something fresh would raise the spirits. Wild fare is very nourishing.”

“Next time you go away from the group, let somebody know.”

“What about nature’s call? Must I ask permission for that?”

Bran opened his mouth, then shut it back. Fates, how he hated this brat’s mouth! Were they not indebted to the doctor, of whom he had a good opinion—more so after talking to him during the ride—he would have never agreed to this arrangement. How in the world could these two people be related? He shot him a cold look before turning his back and leaving.

Kiran returned to his father.

“Annoying him is not the wisest idea,” said Val, cleaning the dirt off the last mushrooms. “Not while we travel together.”

“So you saw that... It wasn’t my intention. But I don’t like his suspicious attitude.”

“Well, he is responsible for everyone.”

“He assumed I stole the mushrooms!”

Val’s hands paused. “I told him you were foraging.” He shook his head. “So inexperienced... What they call foraging is really looting. It is forbidden and punished severely. I understand they will be supplied along the way, but in the old days looting was said to be a common practice, with devastating effects on the population. This campaign is far better organized. They learned from the past.”

“Did he tell you that?”

“Some of it... You found some excellent specimens. Let’s rinse them while we can still see something.”

They gathered them on a cloth and headed for the stream. By that time the sun had set and the light was slowly fading.

“Don’t take it to heart, it wasn’t personal.”

“Of course it was,” Kiran replied calmly. His anger had softened, but his father’s explanation was only part of the reason. Another part was his pride: anger was a sign of weakness, he wanted to avoid it in front of these men. At any rate, losing his temper was a bad idea.

“I will speak with him tonight,” promised Val. “Clear off suspicions. He doesn’t know us.”

They heard steps behind them and closed the subject.

“Can we help with anything?” Owein and Cai were following.

“Certainly,” said Val. “We need skewers. Not too short.”

“Can you find me a flat stone, about this big?” asked Kiran, spreading his palm.

“What for?”

“A cutting board.”

Owein left to find some twigs for skewers and Cai to look for the stone along the river bank.

“What are you doing?” asked him Rowan from behind, holding a water skin in his hand.

“Looking for a cutting board,” said Cai, trying to hide his irritation at being startled.

“A what?”

“A large, flat stone.” He made a round shape with his hands, but that only seemed to confuse Rowan more. “It’s to cut those mushrooms on... Stop staring stupidly and help!” he snapped.

They found one and washed it thoroughly before bringing it to Kiran.

“Perfect. How’s the fire going?”

Rowan shrugged. “It was looking good. Glen is taking care of it.”

“Are you sure these are safe to eat?” Cai’s concern was understandable, he had just recovered from those wicked berries.

Kiran raised his chin, pushing the hair from his eyes. “I know my mushrooms.”

Back in the camp the fire was burning well and the men were moving about, gathering fodder, securing the horses or just busying themselves to forget about hunger. Val nudged his son, pointing discreetly towards the captain, and went to him.

“How are you going to cook ’em?” asked Glen.

“Roasted on skewers is fastest,” said Kiran, kneeling near the fire pit. “We could also bake them on stones, but that would take too long.” He put the mushrooms down and pulled out a knife from his belt.

“Then we need more coals.” Glen pointed to the grass. “What’s that?”

“Garlic grass we call it. Here!” Kiran crushed a long blade between fingers and gave it to Glen. The flavour was strong and resembled garlic.

“I’ll remember it,” said Glen, smiling.

Owein returned with the twigs. "Are these good?"

They were not great, not straight enough and clumsily chopped.

"Ever seen skewers like that?" asked Glen.

"Well, I'm not good in the kitchen," grumbled Owein, dropping the sticks.

"Put 'em into the fire and go find me some thin, straight twigs. Like this." He picked one up. "City boys," mumbled Glen after his comrade left.

Kiran chuckled. "Aren't you a city person?"

"I grew up in the mountains. Came here when I was a lad, younger than Rowan. But I remember what I learned back home."

Shortly thereafter Cai came with a bunch of green twigs. They still had leaves, but one could make some decent skewers out of them.

"Owein's given up?"

"Leave him."

While Cai and Glen were busy chopping, Kiran sliced the mushrooms on the improvised board—just thin enough to cook quicker, without breaking—fastening them on the finished spikes and sprinkling them with a little salt. The wood was turning into hot coals and Glen placed a few more pieces on top of them. That broken branch had been a stroke of luck—dry enough to burn with little smoke and large enough to keep the fire going for a couple of hours. The air was already cooler and a soft wind blew from the north, pushing the smoke away from the village. The men were talking in low voices, not worried or hushed, just tired. The place was quiet and any sounds coming from the other side of the stream seemed distant.

"I'm hungry!" groaned Rhun, aroused by the pleasant scent of roasted mushrooms. More pairs of eyes turned towards the fire. Everyone was. "Are they done?"

"Yes," said Glen, throwing more wood into the dying fire, to rekindle it. From the glowing coals leaped up bright flames, like a hungry animal roused from sleep with a piece of meat.

They gathered near the fire pit and split the skewers and some of the food they had left. Val brought some dried fruits. The smell coming from the mushrooms was mouth watering, yet they were hesitating. Nonchalantly, Val wrapped a grass blade around the skewer and took a mouthful, chewing with his

eyes closed.

"The grass was a brilliant idea," he said, swallowing.

Bredan took a bite. "Mmm." Then another. "Chewy, yet soft... not overdone... flavoured... these are fabulous!" he said, munching the fleshy, browned slices like a lord assessing the skills of his new cook.

Perhaps he was overacting a little, but it seemed to convince the others. After a first small bite, they leaped at them ravenously, mumbling in agreement. Val glanced towards Bran. He kept his eyes on his food.

"Is this garlic?" asked Ceri, nibbling a leaf.

"Garlic grass," answered Kiran. "Found it earlier."

"These almost taste like meat," said Anwyl.

"Too bad we don't have more," said Owein, licking his fingers.

"That's all I found," apologized Kiran. "There could be more out there, but we would need time and light."

Bran ate in silence.

They finished their dinner quickly, which was not hard considering what food they had, but the mushrooms and dried fruits had been a pleasant addition to what, otherwise, would have been a dull meal.

"If only we had a pot," said Val. "A warm tea would be lovely."

Rhun grinned. "Tomorrow we'll have ale. I'm tired of water."

"You should be grateful there's water. You can't give horses ale," snorted Glen.

"Of course I am," agreed the large man, with a satisfied belch, slumping on the grass with his hands under the head. "I'm just saying. Water for horses and ale for, um... proper digestion."

Toph frowned at his comrade, wrinkling his nose slightly. "Tsk! Wine pairs better with mushrooms." Not just his face, but his tastes were more refined.

"Red, smooth, a little fruity... like a young brunette." He made an undulating motion with his hands. "Not too bold, but not too sweet either, just—"

"Shut up, Toph!" grumbled Rhun.

"Troglodyte," threw him Toph affectionately, stirring giggles.

Rhun had no idea what the word meant, so he did not bother to answer.

It was dark and the flickering flames cast a golden light on their faces, emphasizing their distinct features. They looked very different, yet there was something similar about them, as it often is with people who live and work together for long enough. *An interesting group*, thought Kiran, *is what Val would say*. His father enjoyed studying people. Take Toph, for example. His speech was more expressive and his groomed appearance made him look almost pedantic. The square jaw had only a hint of stubble, he had probably shaved the day before they were separated from the rest of the company. Most likely born in a prosperous family. There was a certain arrogance in the studied way he ran his fingers through the flaxen hair, or the way his chin raised slightly when he addressed somebody. It was designed to impress the ladies, no doubt, but Kiran suspected it was not far from his character. Rhun was on the opposite side of the spectrum. Large, coarse and unsophisticated, he almost looked like a brute, were it not for the lively, clever spark in those dark eyes, which said there was more to him than his muscles. But the way he lay near the fire, lax, carelessly scratching his—well, he was clearly a confident man and not very easy to command. From Lower Trade, supposed Kiran. A brewer's son? A smith's? Bredan had said he was short-tempered after a few drinks. Then there was Ceri. The slender man had indeed a calm, almost dispassionate air, but there was something hidden beneath it that made Kiran think of a sleeping cat, looking relaxed and harmless as it curled near the fire, hiding its sharp claws...

“—were safe?” Bert's voice reached him from beyond those thoughts.

Kiran blinked, aware that the question was for him. “I'm sorry, you were saying?”

“The mushrooms, how did you know they were safe to eat?”

“Shape, colour, smell. You learn after you see enough of them.”

Rhun shrugged. “They all look the same to me.”

“Everything looks the same to you, my friend,” sneered Ceri. His tone seemed to imply that Rhun was the one responsible for their misadventure. That earned him an annoyed look from his peevish comrade.

“There are many edible things in the wild,” stepped in Val with delicacy.

“Mushrooms, nuts, fruits, roots. And an even larger number of dangerous ones. It takes a while to learn the differences and, since they have a tendency to look similar, it's best not to chance if you don't know them.”

"You know all of them?" asked Rowan.—The others snickered—"What?"

"Idiot, how could he?"

Val chuckled. "Of course not, I think that would be impossible. That is why we always stay away from those we don't know or are unsure of."

"But it's not as if a few berries could kill you," said Cai. Though it sounded more like a question.

Rhun snorted. "We're still breathing."

"You were not so confident yesterday," teased him Toph.

"The poison of some is so strong, it only takes a dozen to kill a grown man. The death is neither swift, nor easy." The snickers ceased. Val looked down at his hands. "No matter how hard you try, sometimes it's too late..." He cleared his throat, looking back at the men who were watching him with less amusement. "But even when they don't kill you, the experience is very unpleasant, as some of you already know. It's not worth the risk. Some adventures can have lasting consequences."

There was a long moment of silence.

"What about us?" asked Anwyl, voicing the question that seemed to hang on most lips. Even Rhun had pushed himself up.

"You were fortunate, the poison of those berries is not deadly and its effects are of short duration. In other cases they last for days," added Val. There was a sigh of relief around the fire. "But I would not push my luck if I were you."

"I understand you fare a lot," said Bredan, changing the subject. "Unlike most of us."

"Yes. It is the nature of our work."

"Most doctors I met don't."

"Most doctors you met probably buy their medicine from apothecaries we—or others like us—supply," replied Val. "That doesn't make them bad doctors, though."

"But it explains their bountiful waists," joked Bredan, to dispel the tension. That prompted other jokes and the mood improved.

They were curious about the places they had visited and Val answered their questions with little tales and humour. When Glen heard they had once travelled very close to his home, he remembered an amusing story from his days as a boy. Before long they were reminiscing about their lives before joining the Royal

Guards, or various predicaments they had found themselves in after that.

Bran was not particularly chatty, though he was not grim either. In fact, to Kiran's surprise—and, to a lesser degree, Val's—not only did he possess a certain sense of humour, but being the object of a few of Bredan's jokes did not provoke him. He was the most relaxed they had seen him so far, almost pleasant, and his laugh—*Goodness gracious*, thought Kiran, *he knows how to do that!*—although more subdued than his comrades' and nothing close to his friend's, made his demeanour almost unrecognisable. So why was it that every time their eyes met, his gaze turned cold and hostile? True, Val had told him to not let his grudge affect his manners, yet he had made no attempt to be agreeable towards the man. *I'm equally to blame*, he admitted. But that had not stopped Bredan from being friendly. 'A little late to worry about that after you let the cat out of the bag.' His father's words echoed in his mind, making his heart cringe. Had Bran seen anything that evening? He vaguely remembered an odd feeling... The jokes and stories continued around the fire—at some point Anwyl even began to sing—but Kiran was not hearing them anymore. The events from a year ago were spinning in his mind and his mood was slowly sinking.

It was a peaceful evening. Kiran walked among the old trees growing on the river bank, breathing in the scent of meadows and wet ground. The sun had heated the land and now the smells rose in the coolness of the night like tea vapours from a hot cup. Away from the fire his eyes could see much farther and, through the foliage moving in the gentle breeze, he noticed tiny flickering lights beyond the stream. They were from the village, but the place was quiet. Their camp had not attracted any unwanted attention. The waning moons were bathing the sleeping landscape in a cold light that seemed to wash away all the colours, reshaping everything from highlights and shadows. Other times he and Val would have gone for a walk in search of wonders that unravelled only at night. He missed that. Around the fire men were still in high spirits, but their voices had grown sleepier, their laughter softer. The fire was dying and the pit was red with smouldering coals, fewer flames rising from the hot bed. It had not been intended to warm the bodies, but the hearts, and it had served its purpose well. Night sounds filled the air and from the bubbling stream crept up a cool current, touching his face with damp, cold fingers.

The horses were resting, picketed at the edge of the trees. Some appeared to doze, others were still nibbling at the fodder that had been brought to them, but all ears were alert and they stirred upon hearing his footsteps. Despite the last days on the road it seemed like they were not yet accustomed to camping in foreign, open places, without the safety of walls or fences. Kiran could feel it and knew they, too, felt his emotions, that was why he had taken a walk before joining them. Now he spoke to them in a low, soothing voice, almost like a whispered song, chasing away their fears in the same way he had done years before, when Sylph and Danan first accompanied them on their journeys. They did not need that anymore, not so long as they felt him and Val close by, but Kiran still spent time with them every night before going to sleep. It was for their sake as much as for his.

They were tethered a little further from the others. For all their mild disposition, by the rules of their kin they were still newcomers to the group and had yet to be properly acquainted. But they did not mind the company, nor the unfamiliar surroundings, so theirs was a stir of anticipation, not fear. A massage was always welcome and Kiran, happy to oblige, rubbed them with gentle yet firm moves, kneading their strong muscles under the sleek coats. After a while the nearest horse reached to him with his muzzle and was rewarded with tender strokes on the withers. And then the next one... and the next... When his hands grew tired he returned to Danan and rested his forehead on his friend's, hugging him, while his fingers played idly with the long strands of his mane. The animal blew out a soft breath and Kiran matched it. His presence had always made him feel better. He had excused himself from the fire because he wanted a moment alone, turning to his inarticulate friends for comfort. His thoughts ran to the grumpy smith from Ulmaby, who loved the company of these creatures as much as he did, and he sighed.

There were muffled footsteps and Danan's muscles twitched. A few paces away Bran stopped, watching them in silence. He did not look upset, though as he stood against the moons-light it was hard to discern his expression very well. Kiran waited for him to speak, but the man was stubborn, as always.

"What did I do this time?" he asked, moving his hand lazily on Danan's shoulder. The words were more sarcastic than the tone.

"They were anxious at night," said Bran, looking at the sleepy horses. "That is some skill."

Was that—merciful Fates!—praise? How long had he been watching? "You sound surprised." Kiran turned back to rub his friend's cheeks. Not just because the horse liked it, but it gave him an excuse not to face Bran.

"I would find that disturbing... if I didn't know better."

"I'm just paying attention to them. As you said, it's a skill."

Bran moved closer and Danan made a step forwards, protective, before Kiran stopped him with reassuring strokes. "You seem to understand each other."

"We've been together for some time."

"He doesn't look old."

Kiran reached to his father's horse. "They're both fairly young." Sylph leaned into his touch.

There was a long pause and it would have felt more awkward than it did, had they been face to face, but Kiran still had his back turned, caressing his friends. Bran was hesitant, so there was something on his mind. He had not come just to check on him.

"Thank you for your help," he finally said.

"What?" Kiran turned to him, bemused.

"For cooking. It made a big difference to them."

"Oh!"

"...I apologize for my manner, it was undue."

"You all but accused me of theft," said Kiran, a little resentful.

Bran pulled back unconsciously. He disliked his position, disliked to justify himself to the brat and, despite what he had witnessed only moments earlier, he was not ready to change his mind about him. But he was not too proud to admit he had been wrong this time. "Foraging has a different meaning to us."

"So I heard. But I also know Val had explained you."

"I should have believed him," admitted Bran. In fact he did. He believed Valan was trustworthy, and yet...

The first times he had met Bredan, many years ago, he had been conflicted about the man's paradoxical character, yet reason—he believed—had prevailed and had been proven right. So why was it that emotions took over so easily when it came to Kiran? *So irritating*, he thought, moving to leave.

"It wasn't much." Kiran's voice stopped him. "The cooking. I would have done it anyway, whether with you or not."

"Thank you all the same... We will put out the fire soon. Tomorrow we wake up at dawn." He left.

Kiran stayed behind a little longer. Keeping his calm had taken effort and he felt depleted. Sometimes horses are better than humans. They feel your heart.

Before they retired Bran set up the watch and, this time, they all took turns, which meant each one was shorter and they had more time to sleep. Their guests were not included, though. The doctor offered, but was politely refused.

"Did you apologize?" whispered Bredan, wrapped in his blanket.

"Yes."

"...And?"

Bran turned his back to him. "Good night."

Bredan giggled and closed his eyes. It had been a long day.

The morning brought a few clouds in the sky, but Glen reckoned they were not a sign of rain. Nothing had happened during the night and the men were rested and ready to go. They finished whatever was left of their provisions, which was not much, but their company was only a few hours away and next camp was the fort in Keln, where they would find all the supplies they needed. The five had no symptoms of sickness, so it took them less than the day before to pack everything and leave. As soon as they passed the village, Bran picked up the pace.

An hour or so into the ride they slowed back to a walk. Val was in the front with Bran, again. Kiran had avoided the captain so far, but he could not do that all the time and, since it was not clear yet how long they would ride together, it was preferable to win his trust. He and his father had agreed Val's eloquence and diplomatic manner stood the best chance to improve Bran's opinion of them and reduce some of the tension. Winning the rest of the group was a far easier endeavour. Bredan's friendly attitude had not changed and, ever since the dinner, the others seemed even keener to talk to them than on the day before. And whether he liked it or not, Kiran had to admit they were a pleasant lot and engaging with them was not so inconvenient, nor lacking enjoyment.

"I'm sorry about last night," said Rowan to his left, drawing his mount closer.

"What for?"

"You wanted to help us, but the Captain got angry. I saw that."

"It was not your fault, why do you apologize?"

"I know how severe he can be, but he is not a mean person."

Kiran seated himself better in the saddle and so Rowan did not notice him stiffening, or the flicker of disdain on his face. The young man had just confirmed that Bran's problem was only with him, otherwise his men would not think so highly of their captain. "It was just a misunderstanding," he dismissed it casually.

"I'm sure he will apologize. People say he's arrogant, but he always admits when he makes mistakes."

Rowan's conviction made Kiran smile. "He did."

"See?"

The sun was hidden behind thin clouds and the air was cool. It made riding more pleasant, though the day had just begun and, if Glen was right, they would sweat again later.

"When I came to the Royal Guards," began Rowan, "I had a hard time fitting in because I was so young. I didn't know anything. I was clumsy... couldn't even hold a sword properly." His lips stretched in a self-conscious smile, which produced shallow dimples on his freckled cheeks. It made him look even younger, despite the wispy beard he was struggling to grow. "But the Captain took me seriously. More than even I did. Him and Bredan."

"Why did you join the guards?"

"I didn't want to be a shopkeeper. It's tedious, doing the same thing every day. Being a Royal Guard sounded more... adventurous. Honestly, I was probably just running from my duties." He chuckled, "Silly me!"

"Do you regret it?"

"No. At first it was not what I had expected. Just training, discipline, more duties... no excitement. I was a pathetic soldier and the Captain kept frowning upon me—you saw how scary he is. But he never told me to quit. After a while it wasn't so bad anymore and... I felt stronger. So I reckoned that maybe I found my place." He blushed, misunderstanding Kiran's gaze. "You think I'm fooling

myself.”

“No, I think you have the right heart for it. Everyone else accepts you and your captain thinks you’re worth it.”

“Haaaa... yes, they don’t make sport of me as much as they used to.”

“I’m sure it’s just teasing. You are... ingenuous. But that shows they are fond of you.”

“Now *you* are teasing me.”

“I am not. Do you think they were any different when they started? Understanding comes with age and experience. You are growing.”

Rowan squinted his eyes, doubtful. “You talk like Glen. Aren’t you young and inexperienced?”

“I was not looking down on you,” said Kiran serious. He meant it. His first impression of the young man had been one of immaturity and absent-mindedness, but it turned out he was more thoughtful than that. It was more as if his behaviour mirrored the others’ opinion about him, in the same way children tended to act more helpless or reckless, the more adults treated them as such.

“No, you’re right. You’ve seen more of the world than me. The stories your father told last night... I’m a little envious. This journey is a first for me.”

“You have plenty of time,” encouraged him Kiran. Then he remembered where the soldiers were going and bit his lip. But Rowan seemed to have forgotten too, his eyes staring ahead with anticipation, his dimpled smile full of hopes. No one else was close enough to hear their conversation and, as he watched the young, innocent face of his companion, Kiran desperately hoped the events which they rode towards so decidedly had no connection with himself.

A couple of hours later they caught sight of the carts closing the convoy. They were moving at walk speed and it only took them a short sprint to catch up with them. But those were just the supplies carts, so, instead of slowing down, they rode past them until they reached the vanguard, where High-Captain Pryce and their other comrades were.

“I’ll be damned if it isn’t the Queen of Bramble and her suite!” were the words they were greeted with. “We feared you hopped the twig.”

“You’re not so lucky, bastards,” retorted Rhun, whom the unflattering nickname was meant for. “It takes a lot more to get rid of us.”

“Are you certain, Rhun? ’Cause you look a bit off colour,” mocked him another.

“Ha! Think you’re so clever,” croaked Rhun. “I’ve more berries in my pack, if any of you, pansies, have enough bottle to taste them.”

Val turned to him shocked, but the man winked. He was lying.

“Don’t waste your breath,” joined Toph. “They’re just envious because you have such a great complexion.”

“Aye, thanks for the beauty treatment, Your Majesty,” said Ceri. “Purged the shite out of me. I feel like a newborn.” He grinned, revealing perfect teeth. It was difficult to tell whether he was amused or annoyed, or both.

“Anytime, mate, anytime,” said Rhun, obliging.

“I beg of Your Majesty to not concern yourself on my behalf,” went along Anwyl, putting on his silliest, most obedient face. “One treatment was more than enough. I could not impose on your generosity again.” He placed a hand over his heart with affected humility.

“I liked you better yesterday. You weren’t trying to be a smart-arse,” said Rhun, baring his teeth.

“Don’t worry, mate, you’re still my favourite troglodyte.”

“You know where you can kiss me.”

Bert leaned towards Kiran. “Don’t be fooled, they like each other.”

“Had I not seen them before, I would never have believed.”

The teasing and laughter continued with the same enthusiasm, but despite the offensive language, which made Kiran wince a few times—he was not a prude, but he associated that one with brawls and bad temper—it was clear the men were happy to see their comrades back and in good health. There followed questions about what had happened and who the new faces were, the latter of which aroused a great deal of interest among the soldiers, no less because they learned the newcomers might fare with them all the way to Fiodhin. The journey was tedious and they welcomed any fresh addition.

Bran left the stories to his men and went to report to High-Captain Pryce, who was leading the convoy with High-Captain Uren. Bredan stayed behind. He knew the men were not as rough as their language made them appear, nor did the doctor and his son seem scandalized by uncouth behaviour, but he had noticed Kiran looking down a few times and felt compelled to smooth out the

differences. He did not have to, after all, for it turned out even the other soldiers were more self-conscious in the presence of these guests and moderated their speech. So, after the first displays of joy and the introductions—and all inquiries and explanations which followed—they settled into a light-hearted chatter that matched the leisurely pace of the horses for the rest of the day.

“You brought some guests with you,” remarked High-Captain Uren, his tone a little disapproving.

“Yes, sir, that would be the doctor and his son,” said Bran.

“The men who helped you?”

“Precisely.”

“I understand your gratitude towards them, but this decision is unwarranted. We have our own physicians, there is no need for two more. Don’t you agree, Captain Pryce?”

“I agree we don’t need more doctors. But their presence is not necessarily an inconvenience,” said High-Captain Pryce. “Was it you who invited them?”

“No, sir. It was them who came to our camp in the morning and offered to assist the sick until we would meet with you. I agreed.”

“And after that?”

“I told them it is not my decision and they understood. They have business in Fiodhin as well, but they will not impose on us if their presence is unwelcome.”

“How do you know that?” asked Uren, sceptical.

“Because they are prepared to travel alone, which is something they do often, I understood. I talked a good deal with the doctor on our way here. He is an intelligent and sensible man, with a strong education and experience. His stories, as well as their actions during the course of our acquaintance, reinforce his claims and my own opinion of them.”

“Which is?” wanted to know Pryce.

“They are trustworthy. I don’t believe they have any ulterior motives, rather...”

“Rather?... You may speak, Captain.”

“They are more capable of dealing with this journey than many of our own men. Certainly more than the younger ones. So far travelling together has benefited us more than them. I think what they want is companionship.”

He kept quiet about his frictions with Kiran. That was a personal matter and had nothing to do with the last two days. The brat's behaviour towards his men had been genuine and kind, Bran could not reproach him anything on that account. He was not lying to his superiors.

"I understand," said Pryce. "Did you pay them?"

"They will not take any payment."

"You see?" Uren said briskly, as if Bran had proven his point.

Bran wanted to object, but Pryce was quicker. "Have you never met a disinterested person, Captain?"

Uren was only a little younger than him, and a little stiffer, but he had not become a High-Captain undeservedly. Neither had Pryce, whom he knew to be in both the Senral's and Prince Feolan's favours. For the right reasons. "They are not soldiers, they may not want to comply with the camp's discipline," he insisted. "We don't want unnecessary distractions. Lack of discipline would slow us down. We are almost ten days away from Fiodhin. More, if the weather changes."

"I understand your concerns, Captain Uren, and I agree about distractions. But not all people in this company are soldiers, and yet the camp discipline has not suffered so far. If those men are as Captain Keer described them, I don't think they will make trouble for us."—The other puckered his lips, displeased—"What is two more mouths to feed?"

"And the horses," added Uren, though he knew that was a petty matter.

"And two more horses. I think it's not such a bad idea. Who knows, we might learn something from them if they are so capable. I say we see how it goes."

"As you wish. But they are your responsibility."

"So they are," said Pryce, smiling. "I shall speak to them at our next break. Captain Keer, you may go back to your men."

"Yes, sir!"

Bredan drew closer to his friend, so he would not have to raise the voice. "Well?"

"So far, so good," said Bran.

"No sanctions for disobedience?"

"Not yet. But I expect they will be given more duties than the others."

“...That's it?”

“It may sound little, but when everyone will be drinking and we will be stuck working, they won't be happy. That should teach them something.”

“You will join them in their punishment—if there is any. Of course. Very much like you.”

“I'm their captain.”

“And I'm your second, so that makes two of us.” Bredan giggled. “I can picture their faces, especially Rhun's. What about our new friends?”

Bran raised an eyebrow at the last word. “Captain Pryce will talk to them later. But they can stay. For now.”

“That's good news.”

The day felt different from the previous one, for two reasons:

Firstly, they only walked. The provision carts were heavy, so the whole convoy was constrained to move at the speed of its slowest parts. On the bright side, they had plenty of time to talk, and getting to know a little more of their new acquaintances made Kiran loosen up. The soldiers were also eager to hear new stories from the doctor and his son. On the not so pleasant side, the weather did not change, which meant they perspired heavily. Only this time they could not speed up to feel a bit of wind.

Secondly, the landscape was changing. They were drawing near to the hills and the land was undulating more, like waves in a barley field on a windy day, all the while rising gently, but steadily. Corn was more often than barley; they saw apple trees and plum trees and, after a while, the first grapevines—trained in orderly rows, following the slow rise and fall of the land like thin braids on a maiden's crown, and heavy with fruit. The region was famous for its vineyards, especially red ones, and Toph perorated about the different grape varieties and wines, which some of the men found rather uninteresting and Rhun, in particular, exceedingly tiresome. Not only because he preferred ale much better, but he always lost patience with long speeches, most of all Toph's.

About an hour or more before sunset the fort of Keln came into their sight, perched atop the hillock which dominated the surrounding landscape. Below it lay the town of Keln. Back in the old days it used to be a small town on the way east, but it had flourished over the years, thanks to its ever growing vineyards

and now Keln was almost synonymous to wine. On the other side the river Kelund, flowing southwards like all its brothers and sisters, used to mark the eastern boundary, but it was long since the town had grown beyond it. It was the main source of water. But they had no business there tonight, because the road split at the foot of the hillock: to the right it led to Keln, to the left it went around the hill and up to the fort. And they made haste to reach it before dusk, for this would be the most comfortable night they would spend since leaving the capital, and the last of its kind before the fort of Damerling, on the Eastern Road—which ran along the eastern border—six days later. Should weather hold.

CHAPTER NINE

Change of plans

The fort of Keln was an old hold, built to accommodate and supply the army rather than for defence purposes, nevertheless it was not as small as it appeared from below and its stone walls were fairly strong and tall. It could, should need arise, provide shelter and food for the townspeople for a while. Since Laeden had not seen wars in a long time, it had not been used by the military other than for the occasional field training and to house a small, semi-permanent garrison, but it had been kept in good condition and had often held Keln's wine reserve. Over the last weeks the staff had prepared it for their arrival.

Inside the walls was a tower with a number of chambers to serve the officers, a meeting room, kitchen and storage. They were small and provided only minimal facilities, but had beds and means for washing. High-Captain Pryce asked the keeper to make one available for Val and Kiran. Some of the barracks had been cleared and arranged for the soldiers and camp followers and the stables had been cleaned and stocked with fresh fodder. There was space in the courtyard to station the carts and still enough left to walk around or train a small army. Close to the barracks were several large fire pits and on the southern side, towards the stables, a clump of planes had been left to grow since the last war, providing shade in summer.

Kiran had not expected to be offered a private room for his and Val's use and felt much gratitude for High-Captain Pryce's solicitude. The prospect of sleeping in a room full of strangers had worried him on their way to the fort, but he could not have asked for such a favour and doubted Val had, either—he was not the sort to impose on others. To their surprise, or rather his, Bran refused his room, preferring to sleep together with his men instead. He was the only officer to make that choice, which, in their view, was commendable for a man in his position and proved his men's loyalty was not unfounded. It also forced Kiran to reconsider his opinion about him, or at least his arrogance, though he kept that to himself.

Before the sun had sunk below the horizon the fires were burning and dinner was simmering in huge pots above them. The courtyard was astir with soldiers moving about, doing their things and chattering in good spirits, like people on a

market day, though more disciplined and each following his orders with fair diligence. But the fact they would spend the night on beds rather than on the ground, in open field, seemed to have made them forget the day's fatigue. The doctor and his son had taken care of their horses, whereafter, having nothing else to do, they left to settle in their room.

Bran and Bredan were sitting on some logs, which served as stools in front of the barrack, cleaning their leather breastplates, when a young man approached them. He was dressed as fort staff.

"Captain Keer?"

Bran raised his head.

"High-Captain Pryce requests you and your Second. He is in the meeting room."

"Where—"

"The first floor, second door, sir."

"Thank you, we'll be right there."

They took their armour inside, then splashed their faces with cold water from a bowl before going to meet their superior. They found him sitting with High-Captain Uren at the long table in the meeting room. This was probably the largest in the tower and doubled as dining room for the occupants, whenever there were more than the regular staff. A dozen or so chairs lined the sides of the table and High-Captain Pryce motioned them to sit.

"How is dinner going outside?" asked Pryce.

"Still cooking, sir," said Bran.

"And the men?"

"All settled. We have unpacked everything and taken care of the horses."

"Good, good! I know you are hungry, we all are, so I'll be brief. There was a message waiting for us, here. From Fiodhin. From His Highness Prince Feolan, to be precise."

Bran and Bredan exchanged a worried look.

"Has something happened?" asked Bran.

"There has been no attack, if that's what you fear. No. The message concerns the two of you."

"Us?"

"His Highness requests your presence in Fiodhin. As soon as possible."

"We are going there, are we not?"

"Sooner than that. We are moving as fast as we can, but that is not much. Two days have already passed since the letter arrived."

"Does the message say why?" dared Bredan.

It was not a soldier's place to question orders and Uren frowned at that, but since Pryce did not deem it necessary to discipline his man, he said nothing. He did not know these two closely—though he knew Captain Keer was the Senral's son—but had heard good things about them.

"It gives no details," said Pryce, "but, as far as I know His Highness, he says *immediately* means it's important. I know he trusts you, so I'll take a guess and say he has a different mission for you. Beyond that I have not the faintest inkling and should not, probably." He looked at Uren and the other agreed.

Bran thought for a moment. "We shall leave early in the morning, then. Travel light, as we did in the last two days."

The High-Captains nodded.

"Take two more men," said Pryce. "The letter doesn't mention that, but we think it's better this way. I'll leave it to you to pick the ones you think are best. The rest of them will be under Captain Kerry's command and mine."

Bran nodded. "He's a good man," he thought aloud. He was older than Bran—all captains were—but Siams Kerry was the most like-minded of them. They often trained together. A strong fellow with a good head on his shoulders, his men would be fine with him.

"I'm pleased you agree," said Pryce, reminding them of his sharp hearing. Though whether Bran agreed with his replacement or not was irrelevant. "You shall leave before us, so make your choice and let them know tonight. We'll make arrangements to have provisions ready for you."

Bran exchanged another look with Bredan. "Bert and Ceri," he decided.

"What's that?"

"The men we shall take."

"Oh!" Pryce smiled. "I like the way you two work together," he said, pointing a thick finger towards each of them. "It's efficient. Very well, that's settled. Go tell them!"

"Yes, sir. We shall be ready to leave at dawn."

"I said before us, Captain, but it doesn't have to be so early. You should rest tonight, since you don't have to keep watch. Eat well and enjoy yourselves, but don't drink too much."

They stood and saluted.

"One more thing," stopped them Pryce before they reached the door. "Don't discuss it with the others."

Bran paused. "I cannot leave them without a word."

"I'm not saying you should. Just be discreet. Tell them you were given another mission, but no details."

"There are no details."

Pryce smiled. "True. But leave His Highness out. You don't want to stir unnecessary concerns, do you? And tell them to keep it to themselves. I shall handle the rest."

"I understand." Bran turned to leave, then paused again. "What about the doctor?"

"They can stay with us. I'll see to it, don't worry. Now, go!" dismissed them Pryce, waving a hand.

Outside the sky was turning a deep purple and a chilly wind was blowing from the north. On the dirty stone stairs of the tower, they stopped.

"I hope they will be fine," muttered Bran, shivering.

"Who? Val and—"

"Our comrades."

"Oh! If it's Captain Kerry, they will be just fine. And we will meet in Fiodhin."

"Will we? I hope so."

"Are you concerned about them? Why?"—Bran shrugged—"You have it backwards, my friend. We are the ones leaving without an escort. They will have a whole company to ride with, why worry?"

"I don't know. Perhaps because for some it's their first time so far from home?"

"Pfff! Hee-hee!" giggled Bredan.

"Is that amusing?"

"You are acting like Glen. If they find out..."

“Tsk!” grimaced Bran.” Let’s go talk to them. Dinner should be ready soon.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“Shut up!”

Compared to the previous nights the dinner was positively a feast: soup made with fresh vegetables, cheese, smoked pork stew, soft bread and honey, ale and wine. The keeper had even brought Val a kettle, to brew tea for him and his son, and he was pleased beyond words. The fort had a generous stock of firewood and keeping the fires going for a couple of hours was no significant loss, despite their size. They were not like the modest one from the night before, but big, almost like Ardaena’s New Year bonfires, bright and hot, illuminating the entire court with their heartwarming light. Everyone had gathered around them to warm themselves, talking and laughing, while ale and wine poured from the barrels. Rhun was so pleased he promised to hold back his temper and not get mad at anyone poking fun at him.

“One would think you’ve never spent a day in your life without drinking,” mocked him Toph. “Did your mother breastfeed you ale?”

“Now, *that* would be something,” replied Rhun, delighted. “I’ll have you know this is the first time I slept on a stomach full of water for two nights straight. I don’t think I could put up with it again,” he said, watching the fire reflect in the amber drink with an affection bordering on piety. He gulped it down in one go, letting out a loud belch that seemed to try the limits of Toph’s forbearance. “Aaa!”

“Unbelievable,” muttered his friend with contempt, sipping his wine with the elegance of a noble-bred.

Kiran’s face lit up and he laughed softly to himself. These two were such an odd, entertaining pair. As were Cai and Owein, Glen and Rowan, Bran and Bredan. Even Ceri and Anwyl, though the former was so uniformly calm it was hard to tell whether anything or anyone could stir an emotion in him. But what surprised him the most were his own emotions, the warmth that had insinuated into his heart, unnoticed, until watching these colourful people had made him aware of it. When, instead of sneering over their idiosyncrasies, he found himself smiling diverted. Had anyone told him, two days ago, he will feel at ease in their company—not enjoy, for that would have been unthinkable—he would

have laughed in their face. He glanced towards Val, who was engaged in stories with Glen. He was in good humour, which was to be expected since, unlike him, Val had always been in favour of getting to know these men better.

"I'm so pleased you finally allowed yourself to relax," said Bredan, appearing out of nowhere, in his usual manner, to sit beside him. But that did not startle him as before. "You should smile more often. It suits you better."

"They are an intriguing lot," admitted Kiran, pointing to the others with his chin.

"I told you!" said Bredan with a playful grin. "There's not a dull day with these ones. They are good men. All of them. You'll see."

All? Of course, he was talking about the other men under Bran's command, the ones they had met that morning—how many were they? For a few moments Kiran just stared at Bredan, trying to guess his thoughts, his intentions. With a man like him, he felt, there could always be a reason behind his cordial manner. But in that moment he could see no deceit or falsity in the jade eyes or beyond them. Nor in the smiling face, or the hands casually cupping the wine mug, or the legs upon which the elbows rested... nor the heart which was beating steadily, kind and caring. A complicated man, indeed, but a good one, as he often said with fondness about his comrades.

"I believe they are," said Kiran, at last, sipping from his tea.

"Hoy, Kiran! What's that in your cup?" boomed Rhun's voice behind him. "Tea? Damn it, boy, what are you, a milksop? Drink like a man!" He took the cup from his hand before Kiran could say anything—"Allow me"—and gave it to Bredan. "I'll bring you a proper drink."

Bredan nudged him. "If you were planning to run, now's your chance."

"Thank you." Kiran took back the cup, downed the tea and leaned closer to Val. "I'll go see Sylph and Danan," he whispered.

"Be careful," said Val, then returned to his conversation.

We're in a fort, what could possibly happen?

"Where'd he go?" asked Rhun, looking around the fire.—Bredan shrugged—"Damn! He tricked me," grumbled the big man. He took a gulp from the mug, licking his lips. "Slippery bastard."

* * *

Ales & Tales was not crowded yet, but twilight was the time folk usually began to fill the tavern. The regular customers were already there, warming up. By nightfall there would hardly be an empty table. Drest and Alden were sitting in a corner, far from the door. Gelda placed two pints in front of them.

"Thank you, dear," said Alden, smiling at her. He looked around the place. "I like it better at this hour. It's quiet. Cheers."

"Cheers," answered Drest.

The wooden mugs clanked with a dull sound.

"Mmm, so good!" said Alden with satisfaction, wiping his mouth.

"I heard there was a row at the inn, after the fair."

"Row? No. Folk got stewed and some blockheads thought a hopping match was a good idea."

Drest snorted.

"On the tables," added Alden.

"Idiots!"

"Aye. They broke two tables and some benches. Sturdy pieces, those ones," said Alden, grabbing the tabletop and shaking it, as proof. "Oak."

"Can you fix them?"

"Pfft! Finished them today. Good as new. Noll helped me. He's got good hands, that boy."

"Treading in your footsteps, eh?"

The tavern was slowly filling. The doorbells jingled every time someone came in and Alden, who was facing the door, sometimes nodded towards the newcomers. Drest never turned his head. He seemed preoccupied and not in the mood for meeting others. Well, he had never been a chatty fellow. From the kitchen came the smell of fresh pottage.

"Tomorrow I want to finish Val's shelves," said Alden. "Varnish them." He was just making conversation, until his friend was ready to speak. Drest was the one who had said he wanted to talk to him.

"About that..." began Drest. "They left yesterday morning. Val and Kiran."

"Ardaena?"

"Don't think so."

“What, travelling again? I thought he said they will stay put for a while.”

“He did. But he got a letter from a friend. Said they must leave after the fair.”

“It’s the first time I hear about this. When did you talk?”

“The day of the fair.”

“We met here, at lunch, after they helped those soldiers. They said nothing of the sort.”

“I know. Val paid me a visit after that.”

Alden’s eyes narrowed. Drest may have been Val’s oldest friend, but they all took turns in looking after the house when he and his son were away. And they all cared about them. Sharing their plans only with Drest was a little unfair.

“What did he say?”

“That his friend needs their immediate assistance.” It was not the first time Val received such requests, but... Drest took a mouthful of ale. It tasted less bitter than other times, but had a pleasant flavour. “I think that’s not the real reason, though.”

“Why?”

“Because, when I went to their place yesterday, I found a letter for us. It says that if anyone came to Ulmaby asking about Val, we should tell that person that he is travelling to Vessar.”

“I didn’t know he had friends in Vessar. Wonder why he never mentioned it.” Alden lifted the mug as if weighing it.

“If you ask me, they’re not going there.”

Alden’s pint stopped midway to his mouth, then he put it back on the table.

“My dear man, you’re confusing me. Would you, please, start again?”

Drest muttered a few annoyed words, before going back to the beginning.

“Val received a letter from some friend of his—”

“From Vessar.”

“Not from—just a friend! I don’t know where he’s from. Or when the letter came, so stop interrupting me!”—Alden raised his hands, compliant—“Seems that friend needs their help and so they decided to pay him a visit. That’s what Val told me, but... I’ve been thinking about it since yesterday and I don’t think that friend was really asking for help. I think he was warning Val someone is looking for him.”

“Why?”

"How should I know?" snapped Drest. "I'm just guessing here!"

"Tsk! Why do you think so?"

"Because, in the message, Val says someone—doesn't say who—*might come* in the village, asking about him. That sounds very much as if he were expecting it. *In which case* we should say he went to Vessar."

"And that's a lie..."

"It must be, because he never mentioned that when he came to see me."

"Perhaps he forgot," suggested Alden.

"Val? Ha! Would you?"

"Probably not."

"Didn't think so... In fact the whole letter is strange."

"How so?"

Drest shook his head. "Better read it yourself."

"Where is it?"

"I left it at his house. We should meet there tomorrow."

Alden sighed. "Sometimes I wonder whether we've ever known what that man thinks or does. He is so capricious."

"His mind is complicated."

"Aye. But that explains why he didn't show up after the fair... Why didn't he tell me?"

"You were not alone. He insisted that this must not go beyond you and me."

"What about Belesni? And Ansa? Noll? They will be worried, especially Ansa."

"Aye, she is very fond of them, but she can't keep a secret. Women like to talk. Their tongues slip and they don't even know it." Despite often grumbling about her talking too much, Drest loved his wife dearly.

"Can't argue with that," agreed Alden. "We'll have to think of something to tell everyone."

For a while they just drank, lost in thoughts.

"There's another thing," said Drest in a low voice. "He left a book with the letter... *Wonders of the East*... something, by Ellis Greene."

"That's his—"

"I know. The letter says we might like to read it, you and me."

"The name sounds familiar, I think I've seen it in his library. Did you take a

look?”

“I just leafed through it a bit.”

Alden rubbed his cheek, thoughtful. “Did you read any of his books?”

“I tried, once. It was...”

“Sophisticated?”

“Not for me. Had too many words I never heard of.”

“Exactly. This book he left, is it thick?”

“Um...” Drest looked at his palm. “About two fingers.”

“Pfff, ha, ha! He thought we might like it, didn’t he? *Us*, mighty readers! Perhaps even finish it before they’re back, eh?”

“So?”

“Don’t you see? The message, the book, them leaving on such short notice—they’re not planning to return very soon. In fact they might have no plan at all!”

Drest stared at his friend, dumbstruck. “Nails ’n hammers! I think you might be right about that.”

“Sly bastard.” Alden slammed a fist on the table. “Confound him and his secrets! Why can’t he trust us?”

“It bothered me all this time, but I couldn’t put my finger on it until you said it. The message does seem something of a farewell.”

“We’re going there tonight. I want to see that letter and the damn book.”

“Maybe it is meant to explain things.”

“I’ll be damned if I won’t read that bloody thing!” said Alden, grabbing the mug. “And there’d better be some answers in there, or else...”

* * *

That evening the horses were quieter. Perhaps some had been there before, or perhaps it was the walls that made them feel safer, but few stirred when he entered the stables. Danan and Sylph seemed to have made a couple of friends and Kiran watched their *talk* and listened to their content hearts for a while, but did not go to them. *I’ll let you with your own tonight*, he thought, leaving as quietly as he came. It would have been rude to stay away from the other men for too long, especially after the way he had snuck out. All he wanted was to evade

Rhun's attempts to make him drink and have a moment to himself, perhaps sit a little under the huge plane trees and listen to the wind in their leaves. They were so old the roots were sticking out like veins, thick and twisted, and some of the branches were very low, spreading out almost parallel to the ground, giant arms with hundreds of fingers. Under the pale moons-light they looked bizarre. He noticed movement in the shadow of the trees. A man was leaning lazily against one of them, as if waiting for someone. Kiran turned to leave—there was no point in staying if he could not be alone—but the man came towards him. He was a soldier, heavily built and not very friendly looking, who, by all appearances, was waiting for him, though Kiran did not remember seeing him before. He was not one of those who had welcomed their party that morning. *What does he want?* he wondered. The unsavoury smile hanging on the corners of the man's lips and the lascivious way his eyes measured him, head to toes, were all the answer he needed.

"Taking a romantic walk under the moons?" asked the soldier.

"Helps with the digestion."

"Aye, a fine feast this one. You one of the new faces Rhun and his lot brought today?"

Brought? We're not luggage, you overgrown oaf. "We arrived together, yes." Kiran started towards the barracks with a calm step.

"Leaving so quickly? Look at this place, all nice 'n cosy... quiet. What's the hurry?"

"It's rude to let them wait for me."

With a few strides the man was by his side. "How'd those pansies get a pretty thing like you to join 'em? What'd they promise?"

"To show me some big swords," mocked Kiran.

"Who, those sorry arses? Ha, ha! Shitting their pants 'cause of some berries. I could show you a really big sword." The man grinned, throwing a strong, furry arm around Kiran's shoulders.

That evoked an unpleasant memory, but he resisted the urge to shake it off right away. He had learned his lesson a year ago. "You underestimate a wild fruit. That was also their mistake. You wouldn't believe the things it can do to a man."

"What are you, a doctor?"

“Sort of.”

“Well, you haven’t seen a real man. Rhun’s all wind and piss, that’s what he is.”

Kiran smirked. So this was an older rivalry. He did not know Rhun that well, but he could tell which of the two had their organs mixed up. As if to prove his opinion, the man misinterpreted his smile.

“I’ve got something very nice down here,” he whispered in Kiran’s ear, touching his groin with the other hand. The ticklish breath made Kiran shudder with disgust, but the soldier took it for arousal. “Could teach you a few manly things,” he added, licking his lips. His voice was growing thicker.

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” replied Kiran, freeing himself from the furry arm, “but I doubt you can surprise me.” He turned to face the persistent man. “I’ve seen a lot.”

“Bet you have,” said the oaf, baring his teeth.

“Swollen, bruised, bitten, broken.” Kiran watched the grin withering. “I remember a fellow who got stuck deep in a sheep’s backside. Ugly business. Took us a while to free him. He was drunk, obviously, nonetheless he was so well endowed he almost lost it.”

The oaf was staring at him, stupefied. The prominence on his neck was moving as though he had trouble swallowing and the hand on his privates was cupped protectively. His aggressive confidence was dwindling as he was struggling to understand why his advances had led to such a subject.

Kiran was not even blinking. “I’ve seen all sorts of them,” he said with indifference.

“That’s not what I...” trailed off the soldier, noticing someone coming.

“We’ve been looking for you,” said Bredan, walking towards them with his usual, easy-going attitude. But there was something else in it, in the way he put his hand on Kiran’s left shoulder, which made the oaf flinch.

“You’ve got some nerve to sneak away like that,” growled Rhun, offended. He stopped to Kiran’s right, crossing his arms. “Cheeky bastard!”

“Please forgive me,” said Kiran. “I just—well, I was having a conversation with this *gentleman* and I lost all sense of time.” Beyond the guilty tone, they sensed his relief.

“About?” asked Bredan, feigning curiosity.

“Oh, nothing special. I was just telling him of the crazy things I’ve seen. Such as what can happen to a man who sticks his manhood where it doesn’t belong, that sort of thing.”

“You mean that crackbrain with the stallion?” played along Bredan.

“Right! I forgot that one.” He turned his attention to the oaf. “There was this odd fellow—”

But the soldier stopped him. “Other time, maybe. I’ve to go.” His passion had deflated. He shot Rhun a hateful look and left without a second glance.

“Sly one, aren’t we? I like that.” Bredan chuckled, patting Kiran on the shoulder.

“What are you doing here?”

“We came to rescue you,” said Rhun, looking in the oaf’s direction. “That bastard was slobbering all over you. Can’t you tell?”

“What do you take me for? I knew what he was doing.” He brushed his neck as if something unpleasant were crawling on his skin. “Thank you for the help. I don’t know how long that game would have stalled him.”

“Anytime,” answered Bredan.

They ambled towards the fire, where the others were drinking.

“Rhun, what’s his problem with you?” asked Kiran.

“Eh, he’s a lout, that’s his problem. His hand’s quicker than his wits. Why?”

“He called you, um... vain,” said Kiran.

“Sodding son of a—I bet he didn’t put it so elegantly.”

Kiran shook his head, letting out a playful giggle. It sounded like that of a child and his companions could not resist it.

“Not everyone is a gentleman here,” said Bredan, growing serious. “Don’t let your guard down.”

“Aye. That one’s a horny bastard, though he’s about as witty as a dog’s arse. But others are sharper. Men took an interest.”

“Excuse me?”

“What? You haven’t noticed?”

Kiran was perplexed. Not because such a thing was unexpected, but because somehow it had escaped his attention. Usually he was not so careless. Usually. *Except last year.* This time he had allowed himself to feel a little too comfortable with these strangers—*because they are good men*, he argued—ignoring the fact

there were other tens of soldiers that had no idea who he and Val were or why they were there.

"You stand out in this lot," said Rhun. "You're no soldier."

Neither were the other camp followers. *Just because I am mannered and don't flaunt a sword doesn't mean I'm helpless*, Kiran would have said, but that would have been rude and unfair. They meant well and none in their group had been any less than friendly. Aside from Bran, that is. "I'll be more careful... How did you know I was in a tight spot?"

"We're keeping an eye on you and your father," said Bredan. "Last I saw, Val was conferring with our physicians. They seemed to enjoy themselves... if talking about medicine and sick can be enjoyable."

"Oh?... And why do you keep an eye on us?"

Bredan snickered. "So suspicious! Rhun just told you. It's the least we can do. Why did you help us?"

"I see..."

When they reached the fire, the others raised their drinks and cheered. Surprisingly enough, they were not drunk yet, most of them. Rowan was perhaps the most flushed, his freckles seeming to have multiplied and his dimples deeper than usual, as he kept giggling at the not so veiled jokes of his comrades. Bran had broken the news before dinner and before Val and Kiran had returned from their room. As expected, it had taken them by surprise. They were not stupid. The order seemed unnecessary, since all of them were heading to Fiodhin. What were an extra few days? Unless something had happened. Even without other details they figured their mates will probably be given a different mission, one that might prevent them from reuniting once the rest of them reached the city. Ordinarily that would have raised no concerns on either part, since duty sometimes took their captain away for weeks. But the prospect of a war and the fact none of them had ever seen one, let alone fight it, made all the difference. For once even the extravagant claims about the enemy king and his army seemed conceivable. It occurred to them they might not see each other for a long time. Or worse. For it was one thing to talk about war and enemies in a history lesson or during training sessions, and another to ride to them, knowing there was a chance they might not come back. And they suddenly realized that chance was entirely possible. Perhaps that was why they seemed to take drinking less

seriously than the rest of the men, as if trying to enjoy the evening with a less muddled mind. They promised their captain to take care of the doctor and his son, and Rhun and Owein swore to beat the life out of anyone who had a problem with them. Of course neither of the two in question knew anything about these plans.

"Is everything well?" asked Bert, when they sat down.

"Yes," answered Kiran, doing his best to look merry.

"You're not getting away, again, without drinking," threatened Rhun, pushing a mug of ale in his hand. "Bottom's up!"

"Cheers!" said Kiran and downed it, wiping his mouth with the back of the hand.

"That's the spirit!" cheered Rhun, overjoyed. Everyone toasted and drank and laughed.

Kiran made efforts to enjoy himself, but Rhun's words were bothering him. He and Val had just joined the convoy and already there were signs of trouble. Riding with a small group was one thing, but ten days in a company so large and diverse could turn into a disaster. They were safer alone. He had no doubt Val would agree, after hearing about that little incident. Soon, though, the mirth of the men around the fire rubbed off onto him and the darker thoughts left his mind.

Only Bran and Val were missing.

Back in their small room, Val noticed his son was gloomier than one ought to be after such an enjoyable evening. But he said nothing until they cleaned themselves and went to bed. They had found a large bowl of water and clean clothes for scrubbing the body in front of the door. It was not exactly a bath and the water was cold, but it was better than nothing. They already had two day's worth of dust and sweat on their skin.

"The dinner was good tonight," said Val.

"Mm... it was," answered his son.

"Everyone was in great spirits."

"They were."

"And the wine was very good, Keln is not famous for nothing."

"Mm, yes. I didn't taste the wine," Kiran answered absently.

"Whyever not?"

"Rhun made me drink ale. I didn't want to mix them."

"Yes, that would have gotten to your head... Are you going to say what it is that bothers you?"

"We need to talk, Val."

"And here I thought we were talking already. Poor me!"

"I think we should leave them. Ride to Fiodhin alone."

Val rose on one elbow to see his son's face better, though not with much success, since the candles had been snuffed out.

"What happened?"

"Remember that evening at Tam's, when our friends amused themselves on my account and you said that sometimes circumstances give rise to unusual behaviours?"—Val flumped on the pillow with a sigh—"And that I should learn to keep my wits about me and deal with it?"

"And did you?"

"Quite nicely, actually." He told his father the whole story.

"Well done," said Val, feeling both amused at Kiran's preposterous lie and sympathetic towards that soldier. "Though perhaps you exaggerated a little."

"Perhaps, but it was refreshing to see that oaf's consternation. He repulsed me. I felt revenged."

"I'm sure you did. And I see your point."

"Rhun says he might not be the only one." In fact Rhun was certain of it, but he did not want to say so and admit he had been careless.

"One would not be so hard to deal with, but more... I don't think their captains will blame them, should anything happen. We are the ones who do not belong here."

"Therefore the source of trouble."

Val paused, thoughtful. "You were right, this was not such a good idea."

"I know you meant well with it. And I must say that, to my surprise, Bran and his men are not so bad. A little rough around the edges, but once you get past that... I'm beginning to like them."

"Had I thought less of them than I do, I would not have suggested to join. But tonight's incident shows that it was a bad decision, regardless of my intentions. Imagine what would happen if *he* awakened. It would wreak havoc."

"They would think me an abomination." What would they do to him?

"Word would get out. How long before the men from Astur would hear about it?"

Kiran's stomach tightened. Riding with the Royal Guards was supposed to shield them from prying eyes. But an incident such as that could, instead, draw more attention to them than if they were alone.

"I should have thought better." Val's tone was ridden with self-reproach. "Not that I didn't, but I made the mistake of assuming all of them were like Bran's men... To think I disregarded my own statements."

"You could not have known, Val."

"I ought to have! What is the worth of my experience otherwise? Your duty is to protect *him*, and mine is to protect you... I still believe we should go to Fiodhin, just not with them."

"...And after?" The question seemed to hang in the silence of the room for a few moments, and Kiran heard his own heart beating loud and fast.

"We'll decide that later. One thing at a time."

Val's words were reassuring and, because he was not eager to make a decision, Kiran felt some relief. "I don't regret coming so far," he said, after a while. "Nor meeting these people. There's something about them that reminds me of our friends. I will miss them a little... I think."

"That's a good feeling. Sleep well. I will speak to High-Captain Pryce in the morning."

"Good night, Val."

Both of them woke up at dawn, to the low, steady patter of rain on the stone casement. Val out of habit and Kiran because he had another nightmare. Lately—since around their last journey that summer, he realized—they were more frequent. Every so often they started off as his own, with him being trapped by the cold, wicked will of that man, but ended as one of those strange dreams that were not his. Just like on the morning they left Ulmaby. And although the latter were not frightening, there was an ominous feel about that juxtaposition, which he could not rid himself of.

They were not the earliest risers, though, some of the fort staff were already up and they offered them the use of the kitchen to make tea. During the night the

weather had changed. Temperature had dropped. Grey clouds hung low in the sky and the rain poured from them with a dull hiss, blending with the thin veil of mist which filled the entire court. They took refuge in the stables, sitting in the open doors, on trusses of hay. And as they enjoyed their privacy and the flavoured brew—while most of the camp was still asleep—they conferred about the dream, turning it over and making assumptions, and eventually came to the conclusion it was merely a reflection of Kiran's uneasiness with regards to their situation, which the evening's incident had brought to the fore. On the way back to the kitchen they met High-Captain Pryce, who was coming down to have his breakfast. Val joined him and they retired in the meeting room.

"How did it go?" Kiran asked eagerly.

"Splendidly," said Val, looking well pleased.

"Did you tell him the truth?"

"No. I said we should be in the city sooner and he understood. We travel light and much faster."

"That sounds believable."

"Because it's true. I would not be surprised if he guessed more, he is a clever man. But if so, he didn't show it."

"Clever *and* considerate."

"He is a High-Captain, I should expect at least that much. Anyway, we might have some company."

"Might?"

"It is not confirmed yet."

Kiran wanted to know more, but he knew from his father's look that he will not say anything else until he was certain, so he did not insist.

"Good morning, Captain," greeted Bran. "You wanted to speak?"

They were in the meeting room, just the two of them. The camp was awakening and High-Captain Uren was outside, checking the provisions with the keeper.

"Good morning, Bran." When they were alone, High-Captain Pryce was not formal. He was old enough to be his father and liked him nearly as much. They knew each other since Bran was just a child. "Sit. Are the lads ready?"

“Yes. A quick breakfast and we are good to go.”

“Very well. There’s been a change this morning and I wanted your opinion on it. The doctor said he and his son will leave us. They must reach Fiodhin sooner than we can. It’s understandable, the carts are slow.”—Bran frowned —“Do you know anything of it?”

“No, we didn’t speak this morning.”

“I thought so. But you don’t seem surprised. Is there anything I should know?”

Bran did not answer immediately. He would have preferred that others did not learn about it, but he never lied to his captain. “There was a small incident last night, but nothing of consequence. We dealt with it.”

“It cannot be of no consequence if you think they could be leaving because of it. Go on!” encouraged him Pryce.

“One of the men had a disagreement with Kiran.”

“Of what sort?”

“The... improper sort.”

“I see,” said Pryce, smiling. “The boy stands out, eh?” He leaned back in his chair. “I cannot say it surprises me, although the doctor made no mention of it. Who was it? One of your men?”

“I’d rather not say, if you will allow me. We dealt with it politely and no harm has been done.”

“Hm, not one of yours.”—Bran did not blink—“Very well, I will not pursue this. Better not stir the pot. But I was thinking you could continue the journey with the doctor. You said you trust them and they have more experience with long travels. It could prove helpful. What do you say?”

“You said we must ride fast,” riposted Bran. It came out so spontaneously he did not even think about it. Valan and his son were perfectly capable to match their pace. These were his emotions speaking.

“I don’t see that as a problem, but you know them better. It is why I’m asking. If it’s troublesome, then forget about it. Your mission comes first.”

“Have you told them?”

“I told them you will leave, but I didn’t suggest anything.”

And why should there be any problem, reasonably speaking? They had many qualities to recommend them. Moreover, could this not be the perfect

opportunity to find some answers to the questions that had been secretly bothering him for a year? And if they could not keep up...

"I see no problem, either," he made up his mind. "If they slow us down, we can always part ways."

"Then I will let them know."

By the time the whole camp was astir they were on the move and, besides their trustworthy group, the fort staff and a handful of early risers, nobody noticed them missing yet. Their comrades sent them off with promises to get together in the city as soon as they arrive. They thanked again Val and Kiran for all the help and expressed the pleasure of having made their acquaintance, hoping to meet again and have another drink.

"Next time I won't let you worm your way out of it," Rhun threatened Kiran.

"Interesting way to make an invitation. But I'm afraid our paths will separate there. Fiodhin is a big city and we each have our duties, I cannot see how we could accomplish that."

"We'll think of something," said Toph. "You and Valan take care and don't let those two"—pointing to Bert and Ceri—"eat anything unusually tasty looking."

Those two sneered and scoffed at him. Ceri, in particular, expressed his opinion in a very eloquent, though not equally polite manner.

An unexpected feeling nudged Kiran's heart when they passed the fort's gates, a mixture of sadness and concern. It was almost the same as when they had left Ulmaby, wondering when they would see their friends again. But they barely knew these men, where did that sadness come from? Was it because they were marching towards danger? Or because they reminded him of their true friends? He could not tell. Perhaps it was just the weight of that leaden sky, lazily emptying its load over the land. For the rain was not heavy and tempestuous like summer storms, nor was it merely a drizzle, but it poured gently and incessantly—a cold autumn rain, the sort which lasted for days. There was a certain sadness about those. He pulled his cloak tighter around himself.

"Will you miss them?" asked Bredan.

"Perhaps, a little," he admitted.

"Then you must meet them in the city."

Kiran was confused: were they not getting ready for a war?

“We are not regular soldiers,” answered Bredan the unspoken question. “Our duty as Royal Guards is to protect the Royal House. We will probably not engage, unless the King himself or the princes will.”

“Or if the worst comes to the worst?”

“Let’s hope for a happier conclusion.”

CHAPTER TEN

Opposites attract

Bard Keer was not an open, sociable man, in fact he was precisely the opposite. An orphaned child at a young age, he had been taken in by a captain of the Royal Guards, who had no children of his own. Needless to say, it made his choice of a career obvious. Gratitude, ambition and the fear of becoming a burden to his new family, especially after the later birth of their own daughter, had pushed him to study hard and train with his adoptive father like a real soldier. His intelligence and natural inclination towards discipline had helped him become one of the youngest Royal Guards at the time, but the hard work had deprived him of friends and the usual enjoyments of childhood. He had grown into a serious man, competent and responsible, but whom comrades had found difficult to befriend. It was known that he was very fond of his little sister and fiercely protective of his family, which later included a young wife—Fates knew how that woman had managed to win his heart, but she must have been an exceptional creature, his fellow guards thought. Other than that, most people had little success in acquainting themselves with his thoughts or feelings, although marriage seemed to have softened his edges a little.

The deaths of his wife and newborn were, therefore, a terrible blow to the whole family. Those very few who were close to him knew how much he loved her and how happy he was about the birth of his child, despite never showing his emotions. Devastated by the tragedy, he sought solace in the training ward and libraries, instead of friends. He rose to the rank of Captain. But no one ever expected him to recover enough to build a new family. And yet he did.

When Bran was born, his father was almost in his forties. He loved his son dearly, but whether because of his duties or age, or his personality, he did not spend enough time with him, nor was he very eloquent in expressing his affection. Bran grew up to be very close to his sweet-tempered mother, who was always by his side playing with him, reading him books or making up their own stories together, and his cheerful aunt. But with his austere father he was rather reserved. He admired him, in the way most little boys admired their strong fathers, but feared his disapproval. And, although it hurt Bard Keer to see his son shy away from him, he simply knew not how to show his love.

Bran was a quiet child. He was not shy, but he did not possess that happy personality which makes some children adorable, nor the wild and uncontrollable temperament which makes others a nuisance. In some ways he resembled his father—a little too serious for his age, more interested in the whys and wherefores of things than in playing with other children of his age. He had his mother's beauty: eyes like the winter sky at twilight, thin lips, very dark hair, but not quite black, slender frame. People liked him for being well behaved and respectful, despite his uncommon curiosity, but the children eventually tired of his questions and arguments spoiling everyone else's enjoyment. After a while they stopped calling him to join in their games. He lost interest in them even sooner. After learning to read, books became his best friends. His father saw in that a chance to bridge the distance between them. He encouraged him, took him to the Library and even brought him tutors—an expensive undertaking for a family of average means—to teach him history, mathematics, logic and reason, languages and so forth. He could not take him to the Garrison, but he brought home one of his most trusted subordinates—a man named Pryce, some ten years younger than him—to train and build his body. Bard Keer thought a healthy mind needs a strong, nimble body and physical training improved both appearance and health. He could have done that himself were his methods less hard and demanding, but they were appropriate for soldiers, not a child.

Soon it became clear where this education was leading, but Bran embraced it with interest and ambition, to the chagrin of his aunt, who often complained about it to her friend-turned-sister.

"You should stop him before it's too late, Freya. Must every man in this family be a soldier?"

"Not a soldier, dear, a Royal Guard. It's different."

"It's the same. My brother is going to turn him into another Bard."

"I love Bard," said Bran's mother. "And Bran is not unhappy."

"My nephew is too handsome to be a soldier!"

"What would you have him become, then?"

"With that mind he could enter the Court. And that face would hardly leave a noble daughter indifferent."

"My dear Cerys, you're stretching things a bit too far," said Freya, laughing.

“I know you’re a hopeless romantic, but we must be realistic.”

The reality was his aunt’s fancies were beyond their reach, because access to the Court was difficult for those not born in a noble family. And, more importantly, Bran wanted to follow in his father’s footsteps. It suited him. But before that, he thought it best to join the City Guard first. Most Royal Guards’ duties were limited to protecting the Royal House, escorting the royal members and some ceremonial roles. Only a few were entrusted with gathering intelligence and other sensitive, more challenging tasks. To become one of those few, Bran believed he needed the kind of experience which being an active City Guard would provide, an argument his father could not but agree with.

* * *

Tucked in a narrow alley in the Upper Trade, a short walk from the waterfront, was a discreet public house in a better looking, two storey building. The inside, clean and cosy, had a subdued elegance and smelled of fragrant oils and tea, instead of alcohol. It was different from the usual hanging places for the amateurs of drinking, in fact the patrons of this establishment were mostly from the upper classes—wealthy traders, money lenders, nobles—people with educated and refined tastes and means to match them. A unique one among the public houses and taverns of Ardaena, the Wild Rose was one of the hidden jewels of Upper Trade. From the elegant, iron forged sign above the door hung a small lantern, whose light glowed red at night.

Madam Rose was the owner of this place, which functioned as a tea house in the afternoon and as one of the most exclusive brothels in the city during the night. Herself an eccentric character, she detested the word, calling her house an *entertainment parlour*. She was right. She only had a handful of girls, but they were pretty, healthy and educated to please finer tastes. They knew how to listen, hold elegant conversations, sing and dance. Each had been picked and polished by Madam herself—as the girls addressed her—and her services were some of the best, provided one’s pocket was heavy enough to afford them. Because they were, in a sense, her creation, she cared about them almost like a mother and they loved her back just as much. And although they were free to leave the

business—after returning her investment, naturally—so far only two of them had left to marry their clients, though there was no shortage of suitors. The lovestruck grooms had paid a small fortune to comfort Madam's broken heart and the girls had kept in touch with her ever since.

One of Madam's rules was *no children*. She had ways to prevent a pregnancy, or interrupt it, if necessary.

"If you wish to be mothers, pay your debt and get married," she told them. "Don't give birth to children you cannot take care of. There are plenty where you came from."

Since they were very comfortable with their lives the girls had no such wishes. Yet Fates played a dirty trick on Madam and one of them, her first and favourite pupil, fell pregnant. Madam had picked her from the streets when she was yea-high—a dirty, scrawny orphan with jade eyes and the face of a doll—and had raised and taught her everything she knew. She loved that girl as her own and had plans of leaving her the establishment in the future. Perhaps that was why, despite her initial anger and disappointment, despite her own rules, she hesitated to terminate the pregnancy: her adopted *daughter* would give her a *grandchild*. It was the sort of thing which, commonly, women in her line of work found inconvenient and undesirable, but age makes people change their minds and she was no regular mistress. Madam's business was successful and she could afford raising an heir. However, that meant retiring one of her most popular girls sooner than she had planned. She needed a replacement. It had not been an easy decision to make, but she never regretted it, for not only did Bredan inherit his mother's looks and happy disposition, he had also a quick mind and a natural charm. Whoever his father was, he had had the decency to endow his son with some excellent qualities.

Bredan had never felt ashamed with his family, nor had he thought himself inferior to others, or unfortunate because of his circumstances. He may have not had a father, but he had many mothers and sisters and a grandmother, all of which raised and loved and pampered him together. Ama—that was Madam for him—took care of his education, providing him with all the teachers he needed to become as accomplished as a high born. But his greatest teacher had been

Ama herself. Her lessons had placed great emphasis on observation of people's character and behaviour, conversation skills and manners. *'A patron's generosity is proportional to his ego. Our duty is to inflate it as much as possible.'* Her diligent pupil had surpassed her expectations: he learned fast and had a talent for persuasion.

Due to the nature of their business Bredan met a lot of people with all manner of backgrounds, occupations and ideas, therefore having ample occasions to study them and practice his skills. People liked him very much and later on, when he grew up into a charming young man, some even inquired about certain favours, but Madam made it clear her grandson was not in the market. His duty was to loosen up the clients and make them willing to spend their coin, something he did remarkably well.

Bredan took pleasure in playing with people's minds and emotions and learning their secrets. Not from some viciousness of character or ulterior motives, except, of course, encouraging generosity towards the Wild Rose. Madam herself was a proficient practitioner in the art of loosening tongues, but she had never used her talents to harm her patrons. *'He who knows more, knows how to stay out of harm's way,'* she had taught him. *'But don't use people's secrets against them, for it will turn tenfold against you.'* He did not. He simply enjoyed it for his own satisfaction and for the thrill. The thrill was also what interested him in gambling, though it would be a lie to say he was wholly indifferent to the gain. Fortunately, he never gambled large sums, partly because he was not that irresponsible with money, and partly because not even his skills could ensure a win every time. Unfortunately, winning sometimes got him into trouble with the wrong sort of people.

* * *

Arburn was beautiful after sunset, when twilight painted its surface in deep colours, all the while draining the darkening city of its own. Then street lights were lit, one by one, and windows began to glow with warm light, while the river darkened, until it was almost black and the only colour remaining was the orange of lights smearing the rippled surface.

It was a pleasant evening. Gone was the heat of the summer nights and, with it, the humid, suffocating air infused with the stench of sweat and decomposing waste. It was cooler and easier to breath, but still far from the cold, crisp air of winter. The shops had closed, the streets were growing quiet and the taverns were filling with people, noise and music. During the day the bridges over Arburn were as animated as any other street, but after dark, besides the City Guard patrol, only the tardy crossed the river, or lovers who liked to promenade under the stars.

Bredan staggered on the cobbled deck, feeling his stomach twisting and convulsing. He threw himself against the stone parapet and leaned over in time to retch into the river. The taste was horrible. *Bastards!* He raised his head, gasping for fresh air. That smell was horrible. He wiped his mouth with a kerchief, than looked at the stinking stain on the fine fabric with disgust. Under the light of the waxing moons he could not tell how much of it was blood and how much puke. From the corner of his eye he noticed a man approaching and tried to stand straight, but his body revolted against him and he swayed.

“Let me help!” The man made a move to support him.

He waved him away and leaned back over the parapet, spewing out the rest of his dinner. How could a wonderful meal taste so dreadful backwards? On the water surface flickers of light gave away the fish attracted by his refuse. *Ugh! Not fussy about your food, are you?* He turned and slid down with his back against the rough stone, breathing heavily. His lips hurt and the taste in his mouth made him feel even sicker. His stomach hurt, and not just from wasting a meal. He swore—very unlike him—in the colourful manner he had heard around the gambling tables, which he usually found absurd and oddly entertaining. Now it was refreshing.

“I never heard this before. Quite creative,” said the stranger, albeit in a flat, humourless tone. The man was about his age, very tall, well dressed, though not in the nobles’ style, good-looking and too serious. His bearing was almost military.

Bredan could not help a little smile, despite his awful state. “Having dinner beaten out of you has that effect.” The joke did not seem to amuse the other. He tried to stand and the stranger rushed to help him. He gasped in pain.

"Which way?" asked the man.

"That is very kind of you, but I can handle it," grunted Bredan, but reconsidered a moment later, pointing, "That way."

He put his hand over the other's shoulder and they crossed the river in silence. He had to stop and lean again before they reached the foot of the bridge. There was not much left to throw up, but his body did so anyway.

"I'm sorry," he said, wiping his mouth embarrassed.

"Where to?"

Bredan pointed to the left.

The sky was dark and flecked with stars. The flames of the street lamps were not flickering. From behind the glass which had not seen water since the last rain, they suffused the street and façades with an orange tinted light. More light spilled into the street from the taverns and the upper storeys of buildings, where the residents of the Upper Trade had their living quarters. At night the difference between the two sides of the Trade District was most obvious: the Upper Trade glowed, the Lower Trade was dim. There were fewer lamps on the streets and scarcely any on the waterfront. Most light came from inside the buildings.

The passers by paid no heed to them. They looked like two young friends coming home from a drinking party.

"May I ask what happened?"

"...Money."

"Oh! Lower Trade is full of scum, especially at this hour. You ought to be more careful."

"A bunch of sore losers!" scoffed Bredan. "Ama is going to kill me," he muttered, gingerly touching his lip.

"For getting robbed?"

"Huh? For gambling."

The other paused, understanding. "Gambling is irresponsible."

It was not the reproach, but that slight hint of contempt which irked Bredan. "You talk like an old man," he retorted. Who was this person to judge him? There was no reply, but the shoulders under his arm stiffened. He rolled his eyes. "It's not a habit... Occasional diversion, if you wish. Sometimes I'm fortunate."

"Do you call this fortunate?" The man gestured to Bredan's sore body.

"Tonight I won too much. They thought I was cheating."

“Were you?”

Bredan chuckled and his stomach hated it. “Please don’t make jokes, laughing is too painful.”

The other frowned. “I am not.”

“Tell me, do you ever laugh?”

“You do not have to answer,” came the flat reply.

Bredan sighed. “I didn’t cheat, strictly speaking. I may have, um, taken advantage of their overconfidence.”

“That is almost the same.”

“I beg to differ, I did not deceive them. Their foolishness was not my fault.”

“You played with fire. That was your fault.”

“You are not amusing.”

“I am not the one in pain.”

He could not win the argument, so he changed the subject. “I am Bredan, at your service.”

“Bran. Well met.”

“Well met, indeed! What is your story, Bran?”

“Hm?”

“You don’t strike me as the sort who goes drinking at night. What were you doing on the bridge?”

“Thinking.”—*Pfff!* escaped Bredan’s lips before he could stop it—“The river is quiet in the evening,” argued Bran, a little irritated. “Never mind. I was going home.”

“I was not expecting that answer. But thinking suits your image.”—Bran glanced sideways at him, uncertain—“That was a compliment. Oh well. You must have had a very strict education.”

“Some may see it so,” Bran admitted reluctantly.

“Exigent father? With men like you, it is usually the father,” he answered the questioning look.

“...Fairly.”

“Not too many friends.”

“Is there a point in this inquiry?”

“I’m trying to understand your character.”

Bran made a wry face. “Why?”

“Why not? People are fascinating!”

“You are strange.”

“And you are grim like those city guards during the night shift, poor lads.”

“I just joined the City Guard.”

“Oh! Pity... What I’m saying is you are too serious. People dislike that. Loosen up a bit! Smile. You have a handsome face, don’t ruin it with scowls. It’s too early for that.” They had reached the corner of his street. “This way.”

Bredan stopped in front of a house whose window shutters were closed on every level, but through the slats escaped both light and sound, and they heard beautiful music and laughs. The lantern hanging from the delicately forged sign cast a hazy, scarlet light.

Bran stiffened again. “Is this another joke?”

“Certainly not, this is where I live.”

“You live in a brothel.”

“*An entertainment parlour.*” Bredan straightened, despite the pain, drawing away from his help. “Do you find that appalling?” His voice had lost its humour.

Bran stared at him for a few moments, before speaking. “What is it that you do? Besides diverting yourself with gambling.”

“Is that important?... Would you regret helping me if I said I was a whore?” He watched Bran’s lips thin into a line. If the blood suddenly rushed to the man’s cheeks, the red light of the lantern hid it.

“No,” said Bran at last, trying to act indifferent. “I helped a person who needed help.”

“And I’m not a whore,” said Bredan with a smile, guessing that what he saw was just a front. “But my mother was. Before I was born.”

Some of the tension seemed to leave Bran’s body. The rigid shoulders relaxed a little and the disapproving look softened, but he still looked uncomfortable. Bredan had seen this sort of awkwardness before, in young men with respectable upbringing who had never crossed the threshold of a brothel.

“I apologize for my rudeness... I was surprised.”

“You have not offended me, not in the manner you assume you have. I am not ashamed with my family, their occupation is more honest than many *proper* ones. And our house is very different from most brothels. I am accustomed to people’s prejudices about our trade, but, for some reason, I hoped you would not

judge my worth based on that. You questioned your decision to help me.”

“I’m sorry!” This apology was more heartfelt.

Bredan looked at the wooden door, then back at his companion.

“Do you want to come in?”—Bran glanced at the shuttered windows, doubtful—“Sometimes people come here just to drink and talk, or listen to music, or be listened to. This place is much more than a collection of bedrooms. We could have a drink and—” Bran’s frown reminded him he had just puked half an hour earlier. “Tea, we could have a tea and talk. And after that you can go home.”

“Thank you, but I should return. Tomorrow is my first day in the City Guard.”

“Ah! As you wish.” He made an elegant, but not ostentatious bow and smiled. “Thank you for your help, Bran. I enjoyed our little conversation. Perhaps we shall meet again.”

Bran answered with a slight incline, then turned on his heels and strode away.

“Too serious,” sighed Bredan, stepping inside.

* * *

They did not see each other again, not for almost a year. But Bran did think about the strange man he had met on that fine autumn evening whenever his fellow guards tried to interest him in their talks and jokes, and failed. He had not made a single friend yet. They were not bad folk, but, just like his childhood neighbours, they thought he took things too seriously. At his age men were just beginning to enjoy the privileges of adulthood, without worrying about the future yet, but not him. He was more mature than them, diligent and efficient in his duties, and his superiors were well satisfied with him, but some of his comrades, especially those older in the City Guard, thought he was arrogant. Well, he was not there to please them.

The large square in the heart of Upper Trade was more crowded than usual. In the middle of it three young girls were dancing on the lively rhythm of a tune played by a troupe of musicians. They were skipping and sliding and swirling

around, and their long, colourful skirts were flaring like flowers in spring. It was a country dance, a little too bouncy to be considered appropriate for elegant ladies, but the gracefulness and fluidity of the girls' moves and the skill of the instrumentalists made the performance captivating. It was not uncommon for street artists to try their chance in the squares of Upper Trade; besides an opportunity to earn more money, many entertained the hope of finding a patron, perhaps even a noble one. This troupe was quite talented and their audience was pleased and generous.

Bran had no particular interest in arts, but his mother loved music and had taught him a few things about it. He could recognize and appreciate a good performance when he heard one, so he found a spot on one side of the square, where he could listen and keep an eye on the crowd. Events such as this were the perfect opportunity for beggars and pick-purses to prey upon careless—and often wealthy—spectators and it was the City Guard's duty to prevent such misdeeds. Though his fellow guards, curious themselves about the young dancers, had chosen to mingle with the gapers.

It was not long before he spotted Bredan chatting with two ladies and a gentleman from the upper class. He was in high spirits. The ladies seemed mesmerized by his person, particularly the young one—a pretty woman not yet in her twenties, dressed after the latest fashion—to the chagrin of the gentlemen accompanying them. And for good reason, because Bredan looked handsome and distinguished and altogether charming. Although younger than Bran remembered—not surprising, considering that last time they had met it was dark and the man was sick and bruised—he had all the confidence and easiness of a person accustomed to the ways of high society.

He felt an unexpected curiosity to meet him and, before he knew it, he was threading his way through the crowd towards their little group. This eagerness to talk to someone was very unlike him and he knew not where it came from, so he told himself it was just a matter of politeness. Anyone in his stead would have inquired after the health of a person they had helped. He was just behind them and about to call his name, when he noticed Bredan's hand relieving the young lady of her purse with a dexterity that said practice, while his graceful smiles and artful talk arrested her attention. She felt nothing, except delight at his

compliments and a growing infatuation, which turned her cheeks a brilliant colour and her smiles silly. Nor did the other lady, very pleased with him, or the gentleman, equally annoyed, suspect anything.

Shock, wonder, anger and disappointment hit Bran all at once, freezing him in place. He felt silly for being eager and even more so for being disillusioned. What was he expecting? He knew nothing about this man. During their brief encounter he had left a strong impression on Bran, but a false one as it turned out. That annoyed him the most: that, despite his social ineptitude—because he had always had better ways to employ his time—he was clever enough to see people's true character, yet this man had fooled him. What started off as an impulse of civility turned into an obligation to carry out his duty as a city guard. He could seize Bredan right there, but that would have caused a commotion, so he composed himself and interrupted their chatter with a rigid nod.

"Bran!" said Bredan with loud enthusiasm. "What a pleasant surprise!"

A surprise indeed, that the man had such precise memory. If not for that move he had witnessed earlier, he would have taken pleasure in their meeting, but, as it was, Bredan's audacity of facing a guard with such degree of nonchalance was both bewildering and provoking.

"My ladies, my lord, I apologize for the intrusion. I must have a word with this gentleman," he said and grabbed Bredan's arm, pulling him away under the questioning looks of his companions, flustered by the sudden appearance of that tall, grim guard. If they were not alarmed it was only because their friend seemed acquainted with him.

"Certainly," said the young lady, pouting with visible displeasure. "We shall be here."

Bran did not stop until they were out of the crowd, but he did not let go of the other's arm either.

"Oh, my, look at you!" admired him Bredan. "You are dashing in the uniform."

Bran answered that with a cold, unimpressed stare. "Give it back!" he said through his teeth, tightening his grip.

"Beg your pardon?" Bredan tried to free his arm without success.

"The purse you stole, give it back." He kept his voice low, but that only made it more threatening.

"You are mistaken, sir, and I find your accusation offensive," defied him Bredan, without a trace of shame or guilt.

Offensive! "I saw you," he hissed.

"I did not steal, I *borrowed*," rectified Bredan with emphasis, raising a finger. "That strut peacock kept bragging that nobody can fool him, because he has a *keen sense of observation* and sniffs *lowlives* like a hound. He was irking me."

"Oh! And you wanted to show the ladies he is just a vain, self-absorbed individual," scoffed Bran. "Open up their eyes, that is."

"Precisely."

He did not believe an iota of that story, nor did his anger soften at it, but he loosened the grip. If this could be solved without a scandal, so be it. "Then return her the purse. Now."

"That would ruin the moral of the story!"

"Perhaps, but it will save you from humiliation. Don't think I have any scruples arresting you."

"Then why are you hesitating?"

The nerve this man had! "I was giving you a chance to prove your story. On second thought," Bran unfastened a sturdy rope from his belt, "you may not deserve that."

Bredan raised his free hand in submission. "I understand. There's no need for extreme measures." He had underestimated Bran's determination. Worse, his anger. "You'll have to let go of my arm. Oh, where would I run in this throng?"

Bran released him and followed closely back to his friends. They received Bredan with curiosity in their eyes and smiles of relief, but that serious guard looked so out of place beside him that all their attempts at resuming a casual conversation were unable to disguise their discomfort. But Bredan's demeanour was as easy and pleasant as before—Bran could not help feeling impressed by the man's superb dissimulation—and that seemed to allay their nervousness. He apologized for leaving them so suddenly, making a vague excuse to answer their questions and steering the conversation back to them. Then, as if by chance, he noticed something on the ground and bent to pick it up.

"My lady," he said with the greatest, most genuine surprise, "I believe this is yours?" He presented her a purse made of fine silk, with an intricate embroidery.

Her friends gasped. Her eyes rounded in panic and she covered her lips with

a delicate fan. "Goodness gracious, that is mine indeed! How did I lose it?"

"I do not believe someone took it from you, my lady," said her supercilious gentleman companion, puffing up. "I would have noticed immediately."

"Certainly," sneered Bredan. "You simply dropped it, my lady. Look, the strap is undone."

"Indeed. How awful!" She showed the strap to the other lady, who echoed her astonishment like the loyal companion she was.

"Nonetheless, crowded places attract all sorts of questionable individuals." Bredan threw a quick glance towards Bran, whose face was perfectly still and unfriendly. "Please be careful, my lady. Perhaps you ought to find a sturdier purse."

"How thoughtful of you, sir!" She raised a hand to her heart—which, conveniently, was situated in the middle of a fairly revealing cleavage—as an expression of sincere appreciation. "Thank you so much, I know not what would have happened, had it not been for your remarkable observance."

Bran made an effort not to roll his eyes at that. The other man was glaring at Bredan with resentment, shifting impatiently on his feet.

"You give me too much credit, my lady. I have done nothing to deserve it."

"No, no, M'lady is right," said her lady companion. "M'lord would be very upset if he learned M'lady lost her coin."

"Oh, yes, Papa is very particular about these matters." She turned to Bredan with a graceful smile. "I was going to visit some shops. It would please me greatly if you favoured us with your company. I should like to thank you for your help."

"M'lady, what would your father say?" asked the other lady, alarmed.

"I am sure he would agree that this gentleman deserves my gratitude. And with so many *questionable individuals* around..." She blushed, lowering her long lashes. "I should feel more at ease."

"My lady, I am here to protect you!" said the other gentlemen with zest, but she ignored him.

"I am most grateful for your kindness, my lady," said Bredan, bowing gracefully. "But I must—with great sadness, I assure you—decline your generous offer. It appears this gentleman needs my assistance in a matter of importance." He pointed to Bran, who confirmed that with a silent nod.

“Oh, how unfortunate,” said the lady, rounding her full lips in a pretty pout. “But if it is important, of course you must help. Some other time, perhaps.” She turned to the other man. “I am in your care, I suppose. I am tired of this show.” He bowed and offered his arm. She thought for a moment, then turned back to Bredan. “Will you, at least, accept a small token of my appreciation?” She fumbled with her purse and pressed a couple of gold coins in his palm, closing it with both her hands.

Bran gasped.

“Oh, no, my lady!” protested Bredan. “I could never—”

“Shhh!” She raised a finger to her lips. “I insist. I hope we shall see each other again.” She smiled coquettish, then took the offered arm and, with one last glance over her shoulder, disappeared in the crowd. The older woman made a curtsy and followed her *M’lady*.

“There!” said Bredan with satisfaction, tucking the coins in his pouch. His eyes met Bran’s stupefied stare. “What, now?”

“I don’t believe what just happened!” snapped Bran. Then, realizing, he lowered his voice. “Did she pay you for returning her purse, which *you stole* in the first place?”

“*Borrowed*. And yes, that seems to be the case.”

“You knew this was going to happen, didn’t you? You had it all planned.”

“That is a preposterous suggestion. How could I have known?”

“Give it back! Now!”

“Excuse me?”

“Give her back the money! I cannot believe you took it. What kind of person does that?”

“How can I? She left. I don’t even know where, how am I supposed to find her?”

“Who is she?”

“I have no idea.”

“You were acting like you knew her!”

“We just met. I don’t ask for the name of every woman I talk to,” said Bredan crossed.

“But she was noble, it’s fundamental etiquette!”

“This is not an assembly. And thanks to you, there was no need for

introductions.”

Bran was scandalized, he had never met such a brazen person before. Forget anger, this was almost hilariously ridiculous. “I should arrest you at once.”

“What for? She gave me the money herself.”

“Fraud. You deceived her.”

“I did what you told me to!”

“You should not have accepted the money.”

“And risk offending her?”

Bran rubbed his brow. The whole situation was so absurd he was at a loss as to what he was supposed to do. His head was beginning to ache. How was this man able to discompose him so easily?

“A drink might do you good,” suggested Bredan. He had the gall to add, “I’m buying.”

That was extraordinary. Bran stiffened, frowning almost disgusted. “I’m on duty.”

“Ah, I forgot. Perhaps next time.”

“Go home! If I catch you doing this again, I swear you’ll go straight to prison.”

With a deep bow and a mischievous smile, Bredan left. Bran’s eyes followed him until he was out of sight.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered to himself, wondering whether he was dreaming.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Third time's the charm

It was a year and a half since Bran had enrolled in the City Guard, and not as satisfying as he had hoped. Most of their duties concerned public safety and law enforcement, but those in the lowest ranks, like him, were for the most part stuck with patrolling and handling drunken brawls or petty thieves. On the positive side, he had come to know the city better and meet all sorts of people, but his everyday assignments were tedious and lacked intellectual provocations. His comrades were insipid—as far as his interests were concerned—and many among the guards were just as contemptible as the miscreants they were supposed to apprehend. He carried out his duties with rigour nonetheless, however he was beginning to wonder whether it was time to move to the Royal Guards. After only a year and a half he felt there was not much for him to learn, besides patience. Moving up in ranks was difficult, which he would not have minded, had it been for the right reasons, but there was just as much dirt in the City Guard as anywhere else and he refused to let it corrupt him.

Such were his thoughts that evening, on his way home. His day patrol had ended at sunset, but he was not in the mood for drinking or listening to the same tired subjects which seemed to preoccupy his fellow guards, but held no interest for him. He had pretended to have some matters to attend to, so he could walk alone. His thoughts turned to the day he had last seen Bredan. He had been furious and disappointed at the time, but he could not deny that the man was the most outrageous, impudent, interesting and clever young person he had ever met outside his family circle. A personality that excited his curiosity enough that he often found himself wondering what the man was doing.

Light was dimming fast and the side alleys were darker and quieter than the main streets, and almost empty at that hour—a good place to be alone, as he wished, or hide, as questionable characters often wished. They were also less safe, for the same reasons, but it was rare that someone attacked a uniform and, young though he was, his build and unusual height were discouraging. So, despite being lost in thoughts, the small shape cutting him off from the shadows of a converging alley did not catch him by surprise. Instinctively his hand

grasped the hilt of the sword hanging on his side, only it was not a mugger, but a young woman, flustered and dishevelled.

"Help me, mister!" Her voice was trembling and her cheeks were smudged from wiping tears. Her hair was in disarray and her modest clothes smelled of... *kitchen maid*, he inferred. "Please!" She was wringing her hands in agitation.

"What happened? Are you hurt?"

"No, mister, I'm fine. Is not me." She gestured hurriedly towards the dim alley whence she came. "Please, come!"

Tucked in the deep, shadowed recess of door, a man and a child were resting on the doorstep. The child whimpered as they approached.

"Mamma?"

"I'm here, poppet," she said, rushing to him—a little boy no older than five, probably. Bran's imposing stature and sober attire, not to mention the sword, made him cower near his friend, who placed a protective arm around him. "No, sweetie, he is here to help. Come to mamma." He flung himself into her arms, hiding his face in the folds of her skirts. She turned to Bran. "Is this gentleman, mister, I think he is not well."

Gentleman? It was difficult to establish at first glance and in such poor light, but the boots he was sporting were of the fine quality, elegant and skilfully crafted, without being ostentatious. He crouched in front of him. "Sir? Are you unwell? Are you able to stand?"

The man chuckled softly. "My noble guardian," he said in a tired voice, "unless my ears are playing tricks on me." He raised his face, pushing back the hood.

Bran startled. He would have recognized that voice and those features any time. "You! How is it that every time we meet, you're in some sort of predicament?"

"You know him, mister?" asked the woman.

"Because we don't meet often enough," said Bredan with a faint smile. "Or perhaps it's fate."

"I hope not, it would be too troublesome."

"That is harsh."

"What happened? Was it money again?"

"Your opinion of me is very unflattering. Not to mention inaccurate."—Bran

snorted—"I have done nothing wrong."

"Oh, no, mister, he was helping us," defended him the woman. "He stopped them," she said softer, looking downwards as though embarrassed.

"Who?"

"Some drunkards in a dirty mood," retorted Bredan, trying to stand up. He grunted, almost falling back.

"I told them I don't want that, I'm a proper woman, I am. But they cared not," sniffed the woman behind him.

"They were forcing themselves upon her. And in front of her child! What could possibly be more sordid?" Bredan's tone was revolted. He staggered and braced himself against the stone walls.

"Where did this happen?" asked Bran. "When?"

"Oh, don't bother, they are long gone, I hope." Bredan stepped out in the alley with deliberate slowness, gathering his cloak around him with a shiver and a sharp breath. "Was it so cold?" He turned to the woman. "Thank you for calling him. Go home, now, it's late." She opened her mouth, but he stopped her. "Don't worry about me, I shall be fine. Please be careful." He ruffled the boy's hair. "You are very brave. Take care of your mamma for me, will you?" The child snuffled and nodded.

"Thank you for your help, mister." She made a clumsy, heartfelt curtsy. "Fates bless you and your family! Come, poppet, daddy must be worried."

"We should go with them," suggested Bran. "Make sure they get home safely."

"Oh, no, mister, no need for that. We live not far from here. But we must go, or else the mistress will be angry." She bobbed another curtsy, "Thank you," and left, comforting her little boy who had begun to snivel again, tired and shaken.

"I'm glad she is a little better," said Bredan feebly, watching them go. "She was so frightened earlier she could barely stand. Damn, it's cold." He shivered, hugging his left side.

"Not really. What is that?" He pointed to a long rip at the back of Bredan's cloak.

"Ah, they ruined it, didn't they? Bastards." Anyone would have inspected the damage. He just shrugged and shifted a little, as if to hide it.

Bran frowned at that. "You don't seem well."

"I'm just tired."

"I'll walk you home." He made a step forward.

"You say it as if I were a damsel in need of an escort," mocked Bredan.

"Tsk! That was not my intention. You must be fine if you are willing to jest."

He turned to leave.

"I don't need help, but I wouldn't mind company."

Bran reached out and patted him on the back, just below the left shoulder—only a soft touch, really.

"Owww!" cried Bredan, recoiling in pain.

"Just tired, eh?"

"You did that on purpose!"

"You thought I wouldn't notice? Moving slowly, staggering, favouring your left arm. Let me see what it is."

"Nothing, just a scratch." He brushed off Bran's hand. "One of them had a knife. He caught me unawares." He hugged himself tighter, shivering.

"A scratch that renders your arm useless. Fool! You're probably bleeding, that's why you feel so cold. Let's move into the light and see how bad it is."

"You were more civil earlier," said Bredan, pouting like a child. "But less passionate," he added with a silly smile. Nevertheless he followed Bran into another alley, where an oil lamp hung above a door.

This man. "Because of your talent to exasperate people. What's worse is that you seem to take pleasure in it. No wonder you're always in trouble." He was answered only with an offended expression.

Under the lamp Bran pushed aside the cloak, to examine the wound. There was a slash in the tunic, about the length of his palm, and the thick fabric was stained with blood around the tear—the ripped shirt underneath was soaked—but it was difficult to determine the severity of the injury without taking it off.

Despite the light touch, Bredan winced a couple of times. "Well?"

"It looks... painful. And it's bleeding, I'm surprised you have the strength to walk. But there is nothing I can do here."

"Then what was the purpose of looking?"

"To assess the situation," snapped Bran, "since I cannot trust you to be honest. This is not a scratch."

"So that's why I'm a little dizzy."

"Let's go, before I am forced to carry you."

"That shall not be necessary, I have my dignity."

They moved slowly, keeping to the empty alleys to avoid curious looks. Thanks to a year and a half of patrolling he knew how to find his way to the Wild Rose. He knew that narrow alley very well, but he could never bring himself to go inside. Bredan was making evident efforts to walk by himself. He stumbled a few times and Bran pulled his right arm around his own neck, just like the first time they met. But he was growing less talkative and that was a bad sign.

"What sort of people were they? The ones who assaulted the woman."

"...Drunk people. What difference does it make?"

"Could you recognize them?"

"Pfft! You think I waited to take a better look?"

"Well, then, where did it happen?"

"Close to a tavern."

"What tavern?"

"..."

"Hey! What tavern?"

"Uh... I don't know... one of them." Bredan stumbled again. The arm on Bran's shoulder was weakening.

"What are you doing? Keep your eyes open!"

"I'm thinking."

"About?"

"...Fate?"

"Stop thinking and talk. You seem to love that, now's your chance."

"Ha! I like your sarcasm."

"What tavern?"

"Uh. You're fixed on that."

"Because I can try to find those responsible for what happened."

"Don't make me laugh. When does a maid get justice in the upper—"

"Upper... class?"

"Trade. Leave it, it's too late."

Bran frowned, but did not insist anymore. Soon after they reached Bredan's home. The lights were on and there was music, but not the usual racket of a

public house. In front of the door Bredan pulled away and straightened, closing his eyes. He stood like that for a while, breathing slowly. When he finally opened them again they were clear and the dizziness seemed to have disappeared.

“I’m going inside on my own feet. Will you come with me?”

“Do you feel up to it?”

“I should not distress our guests. If you stay between me and them, I’ll manage to walk to my room.”

“Very well,” agreed Bran, swallowing hard.

Bredan smiled. “There’s no need to be nervous. Nothing that you’ll see shall offend your virtue. I told you our house is different. Just follow me up the stairs.”

He took a deeper breath and opened the door, stepping inside as if nothing were wrong with him. The bells above the door jingled and a pretty woman in her early thirties met them with a graceful smile. For a brief moment she seemed disconcerted at the sight of a city guard, nonetheless she kept her smile and curtsied to him.

“Welcome home, Bredan. And who is this charming gentleman?” She studied Bran with an eye so obviously accustomed to men, he felt the blood rushing to his face.

“A good friend of mine, Lill.”—Bran bowed without a word—“Don’t frighten him,” teased her Bredan. “We’ll be in my room.”

The woman’s smile faded. She brushed his cheek with her fingers. “Your face is pale. What happened to you?”

“Tell Ama to come see me. And, Lill, don’t let our guests know I’m home. Please.” He pressed a light kiss on her cheek and motioned Bran to follow him. Behind them there was a soft gasp.

As they climbed the polished wood stairs, Bran glanced into the main room, expecting to see the debauchery he had witnessed a few times during his assignments. There were candles everywhere, set on slender brass candelabra or hidden inside lanterns hanging on the walls, but the air did not have the foul odour of tallow, nor the whiff of smoke. His senses were surprised by sweet and herbal fragrances of jasmine and lavender. The room was handsome, fairly large

and furnished in good taste. Two sets of benches and chairs, carved in a dark wood and covered with dozens of purple cushions, were placed around unusually low tables, set with candles and trays of drinks and tidbits. One of them was occupied by two fancy gentlemen, sitting with their backs towards the entrance, completely engrossed in conversation with their graceful companions. At the other an older man, distinguished as a noble, was leaning back in the chair with his eyes closed, delighting in the sweet sounds a lute produced under the skilled fingers of its player, who was sitting next to him. When she noticed them, Bredan put a finger to his lips, to which she answered with a discreet nod. There seemed to be other such seats further back, although hidden behind screens and purple curtains—there were voices coming from there. But it appeared as though none of the guests had been stirred by the chimes, nor were they aware of their presence.

This place was nothing like Bran had imagined.

The moment he stepped into his room, Bredan collapsed in the nearest chair with a moan, breathing heavily. Bran was astonished he had had the strength to move thus far.

“That will not do, you must take off your clothes. That cut needs immediate treatment.”

He helped him remove the cloak, but, perhaps because of the place, he was reluctant to help him undress further. He was spared the dilemma by the arrival of two other ladies, who rushed in, panting from the effort to climb the stairs quickly and without noise.

“Bredan! My boy!” cried the younger one. “What happened to you?” She knelt at his feet, feeling his cheeks and forehead with thin, trembling hands. “You’re cold!” She tried to pull him closer and Bredan groaned.

“Let him go, Jade,” said the older woman, noticing the slash in his tunic. “He is injured.”

At the sight of blood, Jade gasped, covering her mouth, and her eyes rounded in horror. “What happened to you?” she faltered.

The older woman turned to Bran with such a fierce countenance, he almost took a step back. “What happened? And who are you?”

She must have been in her sixties and much smaller than him, but her posture

was proud and powerful, and her commanding tone reminded him of his father. But he was not a child anymore. It was late, he was tired and her manner was grating. He raised his chin and met that hard gaze with coldness.

"Who I am is of no importance. Do not look at me for answers, I was only asked to help him get home. And since my assistance is no longer needed, I shall excuse myself."

"No, wait," Bredan said feebly. "Ama, please, he has no fault in this." He took her hand and pressed it against his cheek. "He's a good man."

"Foolish boy," the old woman admonished him. "I told you to stay out of trouble." But the bony fingers on his face were brushing it with tenderness. "Jade, help him undress. We must clean that wound."

There was a knock on the door and Lill stepped in. "How bad is it?" she asked, coming to see Bredan. "Oh!" She covered her mouth, just like Jade.

"We don't know yet," answered Ama, "but it doesn't look good. I trust you didn't tell anyone."

"Certainly not. Besides Elwyn, nobody knows he is back. And I told her to keep quiet."

"Good. No one outside the family must know of this. Not until he tells us what happened. Go warm some water and find some clean cloths. I will take care of the rest."

"Should we not send for the doctor?"

"I have handled worse. We will call him tomorrow, if necessary."

Lill and Ama left the room and Jade, who had been kneeling all that time in front of Bredan, began to unfasten his tunic. She took it off with great care, wincing every time he moaned in pain. The shirt underneath was completely ruined—blood stained the white fabric, spreading from the rip like a flower in bloom. It was disturbing. Bran felt there was nothing else for him to do there, that his presence was only hindering the women. His own family was waiting for him.

He cleared his throat. "I should leave."

Jade started, as if she had forgotten about him. Her eyes were wet and the skin around them was reddish, but they were incredibly beautiful. *Jade*. Her resemblance to Bredan was striking. She stood and made a graceful curtsy.

"Thank you for taking the trouble to bring my son home. Please forgive

Madam, she meant no offence. She is worried. We all are.”

“I should imagine so. I’m sorry I could not do more.”

She knelt back at her son’s feet and began to unlace the shirt. “When Lill told us he came home with a guard, we feared he had involved himself in some trouble again, but this...” Her voice strangled and she made a hopeless gesture, a tear trickling down her cheek.

“He was not at fault,” said Bran.

“Who did this to him?”

“...I don’t know. Forgive me, but I must leave.” He was uncomfortable.

“Of course, I apologize,” she said, wiping the tear. “Thank you!”

He bowed and walked to the door, but Bredan’s voice stopped him.

“Bran! Come see me tomorrow... Please!”

He just nodded and stepped out. At the top of the stairs he met Lill, who stopped to thank him before going to Bredan’s room. He left Wild Rose as quietly as they came, but just before closing the front door, Ama followed him outside.

“Forgive my unkindness, sir. It was beneath me, regardless of the situation, and you did not deserve it. I am Madam Rose, at your service.” Her curtsy was dignified, but sincere. “Thank you for helping our boy, we are indebted to you.”

“Not at all. I did my duty,” answered Bran with a rigid nod.

“Perhaps, but Lill told me Bredan thinks of you as a friend. He does not use the word lightly. Please come to visit us tomorrow, Mister...”

“Bran shall suffice.” It was disrespectful, but he was still irritated with her attitude earlier.

“As you wish. You need not fear our indiscretion, though, no one will know of your visit from us. I hope we shall have a chance to talk.”

The following evening Bran found him reading in his bed, reclined on a stack of pillows. The colour had returned to his face and he was looking better.

At first he was determined to mind his business and stay away from that strange place, but during the day he had changed his mind. He had come straight from the City Garrison and, because the hour was earlier than on the day before, there were only a couple of guests at the seats in the back. He had been met by a different woman, who, upon hearing his name, had immediately led him to

Bredan's room without further questions.

Jade was sitting there with her son and she received him with unaffected civility. "I shall leave you to talk." She smiled, seeming pleased to see him, and left the room.

"You came," said Bredan with a broad—and a little surprised—smile, which resembled his mother's very much. He closed the book. "I was not sure you would."

"Neither was I," admitted Bran, pulling a chair closer to the bed. "You look better. How bad was it?"

"Uglier than I thought, but not life threatening. The cut is not so deep, but I will not be able to use my left arm properly for a while. The worst part is I'm confined to bed a few days. Doctor's orders."

"You called the doctor?"

"Last night I was feverish and Ama feared an infection. But I'll be fine."

"Is it wise to sit like that?" Bran pointed towards the pillows.

"Oh, you have no idea how awful it is to lay on your stomach all day. The doctor gave us some powders for pain, so I can sit on my back, otherwise I would have gone crazy. At least this way I can read. Sometimes pain is easier to bear with than tedium. So, how was your day?"

"Interesting. Word goes in the City Guard that there was a brawl last night, close to the Full Moons. Some knave assaulted a party of young nobles, though the reason is not clear." He stared at Bredan, but saw no reaction.

"That is unfortunate, but things like this happen all the time. You only hear about them when the upper class is involved."

"Most likely. This one fanned the flames a little, since we are talking about Count Baynon's son and two of his closest friends. Apparently the young count is bedridden and his father is furious."

"It was probably about money, these young lords revel in showing off their wealth."

"Hm, yes, but it seems neither the purses, nor their contents were missing. It was not robbery."

"I'm surprised."

"Stop pretending! I'm almost certain they are the ones you confronted last night. Am I right?... I can find out by myself, but I'd rather you tell me the

truth.”

Bredan seemed to ponder the answer. His eyes fixed on the book in his hands and the good disposition left him. “They were drunk... behaving like the lowest scum. That haughty brat, especially, was acting as if everyone ought to submit to his wishes because he is high born. There was not an ounce of kindness or sympathy in him.” His tone was growing angry with every word.

Bran sighed. “I suspected something like that when you refused to give me details last night. You knew who they were.”

“Not who, what,” replied Bredan, looking back at him. “I don’t recall seeing them before. But I’m familiar with Count Baynon’s name.”

“Is that why you insisted to enter the house on your own feet?”

“I could not risk being seen like that by our guests... So, what will you do now?”

“Nothing. In your place I would have acted in the same way.”

“You are a city guard, it’s different.”

“Nobles expect us to protect them, not the lower born. As far as I’m concerned, you did the right thing. I was off duty, so even if someone saw us, I cannot be held accountable for taking a drunk friend home.”

“Ha, ha, ha! Drunk!” The laugh changed into a moan. “Damn it. I’ll have you know it takes a lot of alcohol to get me drunk.”

“That aside, do you suppose they could recognize you?”

“I don’t believe so,” said Bredan, after a moment of thinking. “I’m not an idiot, the hood on that cloak is not just for cold weather. Not to mention too much alcohol can have bad effects on memory. But I’ll tell my family to squeeze as much information as they can from our guests.”—Bran’s brow rose a little—“Surely you’ve noticed the distinguished patrons of this house. Some of them are men of consequence.”

“Nevertheless, you should follow the doctor’s orders and stay inside for a while. The young count’s behaviour would be a disgrace to his father, he will never admit to it. Without a clear motive, a culprit or witnesses, this will die soon. Just don’t let anybody know about your injury. The one responsible for it might remember.” Bredan seemed oddly diverted and that ruffled Bran a little. “This is no trifling matter!”

“Forgive me. It’s just that I’m surprised you care about my safety. It pleases

me.”

“I care about morality.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“Pray that the woman you helped and her son cannot recognize you either.”

“They would not turn me in!”

“Perhaps not intentionally.”

Bredan fumbled in bed, pushing away the coverlet. “Lend me a hand, please, I want to get up.” He sat on the edge and pushed his feet into a pair of slippers.

“So troublesome.” There was a knock on the door. “Come in!”

Jade brought a tray with cups of steaming tea, water and refreshments, placing it on a small table near the bed.

Bran stood. “This is very kind of you, but I should be leaving.”

“Nonsense, sir, you are welcome to stay as long as you wish. This boy is not going to sleep very soon. He is a night-bird.” She put a folded paper on the table. “Take your medicine. I’ll be right back to change your dressing.”

Bran was still standing.

“You heard her, there’s no need to leave so soon. Unless... you fear for your propriety.”

The allusion appalled Bran, whose face was flooded with colour. Again.

“Pfff, hee-hee!” giggled Bredan, hiding his face like a child. “I’m sorry, but you are so serious I cannot help it.”

“I don’t find it at all amusing,” Bran said gruffly, sitting back in his chair. “Your mind is too perverted for your age.”

“Oh? Pray, what age would that be, in your opinion?”

Bran measured him with suspicion. A moment ago he would have said Bredan was not twenty yet—the age when a person was officially regarded as an adult—but the tone of that question made him reconsider. By now he knew the man was not what he appeared to be. “A little over twenty,” he surmised.

“Pfff! You changed your mind just now, didn’t you? You thought I was underage.” His amusement annoyed his new friend, so he checked himself. *You are too serious.* “Make that *little* three years and you are right.”

He was actually older than him. And all the time he was convinced it was the other way. “Still too perverted,” sneered Bran, to hide his surprise.

“And do you think this place is to blame?”

“...In your case, I think it’s a matter of disposition and personal choice. You enjoy confounding people.”

“Hm, I do. And yet, you’re still here... I’m really glad you are.” Bredan unfolded the paper and poured its content into a glass of water, which he emptied with a disgusted grimace. “Horrible.” He took a sip of tea and handed Bran the other cup. “Try this. It’s Ama’s favourite blend.”

The warm vapours carried a sweet, flowery fragrance, but there was something else, a fresh tang new to him.

“Jasmine,” said Bran. “And... what’s the other?”

“Citron beebrush. Ama says it’s good against fever and inflammation.”

Bran sipped from the tea. It had a pleasant sweetness. “Ama is Madam Rose?”

“Ama for me, Madam for the family and Madam Rose for everybody else. She is my grandmother and teacher. The head of this house. A formidable and terrifying woman, the like of which you’ve probably never seen.”

“She is an impressive presence,” admitted Bran.

“You have no idea.”

“She reminds me of my father.”

Bredan chuckled.

Jade returned with a roll made up of thin strips of clean cloth, a bottle and a pair of scissors. “Time to change,” she said, placing them on the bed. She turned to Bran. “You are not squeamish about wounds, sir, are you?”—Bran shook his head—“Then can I trouble you to help me?”

“Just tell me what to do.”

She unlaced her son’s nightshirt and gently slid it off his shoulders. Then she cut one end of the bandages wrapped around his chest and shoulder and began unwrapping them, until they were all off. Bredan turned to the right, exposing the left shoulder.

“Are you not curious?” he asked Bran. “It’s not pretty, though, I saw it myself.”

Jade took off the pad of cloth covering the cut. Bran winced, feeling a sting in his own shoulder—in truth he had not seen many wounds. It was an oblique cut across the shoulder blade, about five inches long and stitched like the leather on a shoe. The skin was swollen and red and there was dried blood on it, but the

cut looked closed.

“Did... Madam Rose do this?”

“The stitching? Yes. I told you she is terrifying.”

“Bredan!” chided Jade. She poured alcohol on a clean piece of cloth and dabbed the wound. Bredan hissed, but she did not stop. “If Madam heard what you just said, she’d pour the whole bottle on you.”

“Told you.”

“Oh, sit still!”

She finished wiping the skin and put a new pad on the wound. “Could you hold here, please?” she asked Bran. She carefully wrapped the new bandages, until the pad was completely hidden, then pulled the shirt back and laced it.

“There. I’ll take these away for washing.”

After she left Bredan noticed Bran was still standing, staring at him with a strange look. “What is it?”

“Nothing, I just realized how thin you are.”

“So?” He had never minded his boyish physique, but compared to Bran he looked immature, which was probably why the other had thought him so young. For some reason that comparison was a little irritating.

“I was wondering where all that strength from yesterday came from.”

“Ah, that. An effort of will. Ama’s training. We must not distress the guests with our problems, that would be bad for the business. And since any gentleman I meet has the potential to become a guest, I learned to put up a front.”

Bran stiffened. “That is...”

“Mercantile?”

“Dishonest.”

“Perhaps, but I’m neither unprincipled, nor always pretending. I was taught to read people since I was a boy, and being honest or not depends on what I see. Oh, come now! You are a clever man, don’t tell me you believe I’ve been dishonest with you.”

He did not, but... Bran sighed. “I don’t understand you at all... At any rate, hardening your will is not enough. You should build your body as well. A healthy mind needs a strong body.”

“Is that what your father taught you?”

“Yes. And I agree with him.”

“Well, I was raised by eight women. They never told me who my father is. Perhaps they don’t even know.”

“...I’m sorry.”

“What ever for? There is nothing I wanted as a child. Love, attention, education—they spared no effort for me. I think of myself as being more fortunate than many people.”

Every time Bredan spoke about his family, there was this passion that made him glow with pride. Bran smiled inwardly at the familiar feeling. He emptied the cup and placed it back on the tray.

“Thank you for the tea, it was very tasty.”

“Are you leaving already?”

“It’s late.”

“Of course. Well, then... will you come tomorrow?”

“Perhaps. If I learn anything new about the young count.”

“Ah, yes.” Bredan stood and led him to the door. “Thank you very much for visiting me. Your company is very refreshing. If... I have offended you in any way, I apologize. Just remember that our door will always be open.”

“I will.”

A week later Count Baynon’s son was seen riding in the city with his friends, looking every bit the careless, arrogant peacock he was. It appeared he had suffered from a severe case of post-drinking headache, coupled with a head injury in the form of a lump on his temple, hidden under a new hat. To his acquaintances he bragged that the reason the robbery attempt had failed was because of his fearlessness and self-defence mastery, but some said he had been too drunk to remember what happened and too embarrassed to admit it. And that the count had been so angry with his son, he had confined him to the house for a week, as punishment. His friends, equally embarrassed, were backing the son’s story. But whether any of them remembered the assault or the assailant’s face, it was not clear. Nevertheless they kept away from the Full Moons. This was what Bredan’s family, whom he had told the whole story, learned from their guests.

Since, in the end, nothing was stolen and no witnesses were found, nor any information about the culprit, Count Baynon had dropped the matter after a few days and the guards had given up searching. But the owner of the tavern

remembered three young lords drinking at his place and causing quite a stir by claiming someone had tried to rob them. He had thought they were drunk and in the mood for a brawl. This was what Bran learned from his fellow guards and his own inquiries.

Bredan was slowly healing. He kept to his room for a week and to the house for another fortnight. Those patrons who had asked about him were told he was suffering from food poisoning and could not come out of his room. A good excuse, for, when he finally made his appearance, his lenthitude did not raise any eyebrows. Moving the left arm was less painful and he began to use it, little by little. But he felt like a caged animal and would have gone crazy, had it not been for the guests and Bran's visits.

During that time Bran went to see him almost every day and, after Bredan began to take walks in the evening, they sometimes went to drink together, in the Lower Trade. There were a few quiet places there, where they could sit and talk without running into other guards or cocky nobles. Bran had grown less conflicted about the Wild Rose and its ways, and had discovered that Madam Rose was a very intelligent, respectable—and surprisingly pleasant—person and that the other women were amiable and well educated. They had quickly taken a liking to him, but none of them, not once, had made any advances to him or had been anything less than courteous and obliging. In that house he was treated as a friend, not a guest.

"I often thought about what you said when you first visited me," said Bredan one day, when they were returning from the Lower Trade. "About my body. It never bothered me that I lacked physical strength. Since my gift is talking to and charming people—"

"Beguiling them, you mean."

"—I thought I could manage any situation."

"Your overconfidence has gotten you into trouble more than once. How could you believe that?"

"I like to think I can outwit the rest."

"Don't be so smug, you cannot outwit a knife."

"That's also true. But I never thought I would have to... Before you, nobody

ever said I was too thin. If anything, women liked it. Our guests liked it, some of them too well.”

Bran frowned. “Are you saying—”

“Fates, no! I have no interest in men and Ama made it very clear to them that she will not allow it. But as it is, my figure suits my role in that house. I must not change that.”

“You can be strong without losing your grace or nimbleness.”

Bran was broad-shouldered, but his built was well balanced by his height. He looked strong without being brawny and he was light-footed.

Bredan glanced at him. “I can see that.”

“You wish to train?”

“Well, it’s been over two months, but my arm is still weak. It’s troublesome. And perhaps if I had been faster that day, this would not have happened. I wish I had enough strength to avoid such conclusions in the future.” He rubbed his left shoulder. “I was lucky, it could have been my face.”

Normally Bran would have scoffed at such vanity, but he knew what his friend meant. “Perhaps I could teach you a few moves. To defend yourself.”

“That would not be bad, no. Would you do that?”

And so he began to train with Bran at his house. It was not easy, at first, the muscles in the left shoulder were weak and hurting, but his teacher was patient and methodical and, gradually, he began to enjoy their sessions. He also met Bran’s family. The mother and aunt were immediately charmed by his personality, but the father proved a real challenge. That only made Bredan more determined to win him over.

Bran, on the other hand, discovered new faces to the city and its people and that made his duties seem less tedious. He also had a friend now, one that shared his inquisitive nature and some of his interests—even if the reasons were not always the same—and whom he could talk to without feeling his mind dulling. Thanks to Bredan he began to open up and his everyday social intercourse slowly improved.

He spent another year and a half in the City Guard, before deciding to move to the Royal Guards. After that they met less often, as he moved into the Garrison and, between training and study, he allowed himself less time for

drinking or talking walks in the city. His goal had always been to become one of those few entrusted with difficult—and therefore more interesting—duties, but he was too young and had much to learn and prove before that happened.

Bredan had made a lot of progress. His shoulder had recovered almost completely and they continued their sessions once a week. He returned to his former habits and ran into more predicaments, though he was more capable to deal with them than before.

A year after moving to the Royal Guards, Bran, with the approval and support of Jade, Madam Rose and her girls, persuaded his friend to join as well.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Enchanted forest

The rain had softened into a drizzle, but the sun remained hidden behind heavy clouds and the air had none of the warmth from the previous days. Vineyards were slowly making way to orchards and pastures, and, further on, the rolling hills were dressed in forests painted in vibrant autumn colours. The dust road, now muddy and slippery and full of dirty puddles, looked like an old scar on the grassy landscape, climbing up and down the slopes or following the contours of the hillsides. They met very few people, some farmers and a couple of carts taking fruits to Keln, but it looked as though the rain had drained their spirits. Only cattle seemed to care little about the weather, grazing with perfect indifference, the bells on their necks jangling almost without echo.

* * *

Shrouded in fog and the fine curtain of rain, the town seemed asleep from afar, but the streets of the Trade District were coming to life. Shop owners were opening their doors, carts were being loaded with barrels of wine and cider, and travelling merchants were getting ready for an early start on their journey to the capital. Street cleaners were scraping the manure from the cobblestones, loading it onto small carts to take it outside the town and store it for further use as fertilizer in vineyards and orchards. The stuff was soaked and the pungent smell rising from it seemed to stay trapped in the fog, despite the rain.

Keln was much smaller compared to Ardaena and not as crowded, and its Trade District was not divided into trading and manufacturing. Instead one found all of them in the same part of the town: shops, taverns, workshops, inns, markets and so forth. Its main trade was wine, but other kinds of alcohol were produced there—apple cider and various fruit spirits—and most businesses revolved around that. Because of it, and because they were in the season, above the usual stench of a town—for stench it seemed the smell they had been used to, after almost a week of breathing the air of the countryside—there was a

ubiquitous, almost nauseating smell of fruits fermentation that seemed to stick to the clothes and hair of anyone spending more than a day in Keln. It was softer now, perhaps because the rain had washed some of it. The town was also not as clearly segregated as the capital, but with the dominant wind blowing from the north, most wealthy families were living in the northern part, whilst the wineries and distilleries had been built to the south. A network of canals supplied them with water from Kelund.

Few people spared more than a look at their small group. It was a busy time for their businesses and travellers were common, though perhaps not so early. But the rain, the constant dripping from eaves and old gutters, and the growing puddles on the streets made them look mostly downwards.

“Doctor Breen?”

They had just crossed Kelund on the Trade Bridge, a solid stone structure arching over the river, whose waters were swollen and fast, a positive sign that autumn rains were pouring all over the country. In front of an inn a middle aged man of average height and more than average girth was assisting some guests, who were leaving.

“Blimey! If it isn't the good doctor.”

The loud enthusiasm surprised them and they turned around. The man came towards them with a laughing face, shielding his eyes with a big hand as he looked upwards.

“Upon my word, Master Combs, your memory is surprising! Greetings, my dear man.”

“Greetings, Doctor Breen. Last time you visited us was four years ago, in early summer,” said the innkeeper, showing his strong teeth. “My lady served you freshly baked apple pies.” His face was all laughing wrinkles.

“That could not be more true,” answered Val, returning the smile. “You look as strong as I remember.”

“My joints are beginning to creak here and there, otherwise I cannot complain.”

“And how is your lovely wife?”

“Oh, she's much better, thanks to you. She will be pleased to know you are here. And bake you one of those pies again, with fresh apples. Is your son not with you?”

"I'm here, Master Combs," said Kiran, raising his face and pushing a few loose strands—curling under the damp touch of the mist—from his eyes. "Good to see you again."

"Kiran?" The innkeeper's eyes rounded. "Bless my soul, I almost didn't know you! Look how tall you are and such a fine man. Master Kiran, I should say," added Combs with a candid smile which made Kiran colour. "My Fionna's grown into a lady, you know? And she does justice to her name."

Kiran's face flushed even brighter. "I'm sure she does," he said, unable to hide his embarrassment.

His companions snickered, with the exception of Bran, who was growing impatient. Sitting in the rain to listen to idle conversation that did not concern them was irritating. The inn's guests were tacking up their horses, without paying attention to them or the rain.

"When did you arrive?"

"Last night," said Val.

"Well, why didn't you come to stay at our place? You are always welcome."

Bran cleaned his throat.

"Master Combs, that is very kind of you. But this time it's a little more complicated and I'm afraid we cannot oblige. I cannot tell you how much I regret, but our business is pressing."

"I see you have more company than usual," said Combs, eyeing the young riders with undisguised curiosity.

"Friends."

"Valan, we must go," said Bran, trying to keep a civil tone, although that failed to conceal his ill-humour.

Bredan thought one of the guests perked his head just then, but the man did not turn. He just moved on the other side of his horse to check the girth.

"Where are you heading, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Fiodhin," replied Val. "I apologize, Master Combs, but we must leave you. I promise we will stop by when we return. Please send our best regards to you wife and daughter."

"Thank you, I will, though I'm sure they will regret not seeing you. But, Doctor, surely you've heard rain's been much worse in other parts. Been pouring for almost a week. Waters have broken some bridges, is what I heard."

They were turning to leave, but that stopped them. They knew nothing of it. Neither did the fort's staff, apparently.

"People tend to exaggerate," said Bran.

"So they do, sir, but I have it on good authority that the bridge in Appleby is down, but two days from here. And before that, folk going to Damerling had to turn round in Thorpes, I heard."

"Damn it!"

"Perhaps they did something about it by now," said Bredan.

"I doubt it, sir, the weather's been too bad. You might want to sit a couple of days, till the waters calm," suggested Combs.

"Out of the question!" said Bran, so firmly he startled the poor innkeeper, who looked at the doctor as though asking where he had found himself such friends. "We shall take our chances."

"Forgive my impetuous friend, Master Combs, it is just that we cannot afford to delay," said Val. "Is there any other road we could take?"

"Sure there is," answered the man, brightening. "You might even say it's a shortcut, if you don't mind a bit of wilderness. Never been there myself, but folk who have said the road is as fine as any."

* * *

By the time they reached a small village, nestled in a shallow valley with gentle slopes, man and horse were soaked, tired and chilled to the bones. Daylight was not fading yet, but, since they were all new to those parts, Val suggested they should spend the night there.

"Better in a village than out in the rain," he said. "Here, at least, our clothes will dry and we'll have clean water."

"Then let's find shelter," agreed Bran. He was not entirely pleased with their progress, but pushing everyone from the first day was not going to help.

"And some food. We ought to save our provisions."

Bran consented without any comment. Only, as they very soon came to realize, there was no place where travellers could lodge in, just a tavern where a few local men were warming over drinks. Val dismounted, motioning his son to

follow him.

"We shall take care of it. You look too much like soldiers, let's not alarm the poor people."

"We *are* soldiers," Bran said morosely. They had donned civil clothing under the leather breastplates and warm cloaks on top—now heavy and dripping with water—in the hopes of attracting less attention, but the swords were too big to hide.

"We'll be right back," said Val and they slipped inside.

After a time that seemed an eternity, they emerged from the tavern, followed by a fortyish farmer.

That night they slept in a barn, at the edge of the village, on a bed of sweet scented hay. Basic accommodation, meant for livestock and fodder, not people, but it satisfied their needs. The structure had a loft stacked with trusses of hay, from which they improvised a bed. Beneath it their horses were tethered alongside two others and half a dozen goats, all cramped in a space too little for so many occupants, just like their own. But at least it was sheltered and dry and there was food and water for all of them. Two opposite walls had each one opening at the loft's level, like a window, only without shutters, so the air inside was fresh, but cold. The farmer brought them some old blankets to warm themselves, while their clothes hung on beams or lay spread on hay to dry.

After settling in and politely declining the invitation to sup with the family, they were offered cold food, which they could eat in the barn, and rough cider. Fresh goat cheese, smoked pork fat with garlic, bread and apple jam. Simple food, really, but soft and tasty and plenty to satisfy their hunger. Val advised them to refrain from drinking too much, since home brewed cider tended to be strong, suggesting that a hot tea would be more suitable to chased the chill out of their limbs, so they agreed to both. All of that at almost a quarter of the price they would have paid had they stayed at an inn, plus two rolls of powder for the farmer's painful joints. Much cheaper than Bran had expected and, on top of that, discretion, for the man had asked no questions about them or their business. Either the doctor had already told him some story—Bran made a note to verify that later—or the man himself was not the prying sort. Whichever the case, the situation suited them. And before they retired, Val paid a visit to the farmer's

house, concerning one of his sons and a fever.

The morning dawned dull and cold, but during the night the rain had ceased and the crisp air, prickling the skin, filled their nostrils with rich scents of grass, wet ground, wood smoke and manure, stirring all their senses. Around the village roosters were calling the beginning of a new day, urging men to come down from their warm beds and prepare for work. Most of the clothes had dried; only the cloaks, which had suffered the most severe water treatment, were still damp. No matter, they would dry on them during the ride, provided it did not rain again. They had all slept, and quite well, though in the evening they had debated whether they should keep watch. But since anyone trying to sneak up on them would have had to walk past the huddled animals below, making some noise would have been unavoidable. No one could have surprised them, so, one by one, they had allowed the soothing sound of rain to carry them into a peaceful sleep. Even the animals had been surprisingly quiet, seeming to find safety and comfort in the warmth of so many bodies, if not so much room to move.

A frugal breakfast from their own provisions, soured milk from the farmer and a few inquiries about the road—along with many thanks for the kind hospitality and a bag of crisp, juicy apples, courtesy of their host—and they were on the move before the village had fully awakened. And by the briskness of their gait, the horses too, rested, fed and watered, were eager for more exercise.

The soft mud on the road had turned into a viscous, slippery muck that stuck to the hooves and they were making slow progress, particularly uphill. But after an hour or more they reached the trees, where dead leaves littering the road provided enough friction, and they were able to pick up the pace.

At first the forest was fairly thin. Young beeches, ashes and oaks rose to the sky, straight and tall, with maples and hazels growing in their shade and other shoots arching towards the road for light. At their feet prickly brambles crept over roots and fallen branches, atop a carpet of withering plants and litter, flecked with freshly fallen leaves. Here and there were signs of foraging and woodcutting: wheel tracks, trails of disturbed ground leading deeper inside, wood shavings and leafy branches scattered about. As they rode on the view slowly changed and, with it, light dimmed. Trees were larger and little else grew

under the closing canopy. Rotten trunks, fallen to the ground, were encrusted with lichens and from their decaying bodies sprung clusters of spindly mushrooms with delicate, shiny caps. Others had popped on the forest floor, their striking crimson hats standing out against the uniform layer of dead leaves, the colour of old copper, shed on former autumns.

“Mushrooms!” cried Bert, excited by the sudden recollection of a certain dinner from a few days before. Who would forget that?

“Oh, yes, they are superb. I suggest you stay away from them, unless you are bored with life,” said Val, spoiling his joy. “Those, however, are quite a treat,” he added a few moments later, showing Bran the little bulges in the leafy carpet, where less conspicuous mushrooms were pushing towards light, following the last days’ rain.

“What do you think, Captain? Should we take a break to stretch our limbs?” asked Bredan.

Bran agreed, on condition that they kept it short. “Though I doubt we can make fire tonight. Everything is damp,” he said, taking a deep breath of the musty air.

“They taste good even raw,” said Val.

“Ugh!”

“You say so now, but these will make us less thirsty than the dry, salty food in our packs. We should be mindful of our water. Gathering it in the absence of a source is time consuming.”

Bran’s lips pressed together slightly.

They—Val and Kiran, that is, for they would not risk entrusting a novice with the task—gathered only enough mushrooms for one meal, while the rest idled about and the horses grazed on what little grass trimmed the road sides. Then they took off.

Gradually all hints of folk passage disappeared, leaving the place pristine. The road, no wider than two people riding abreast, wound left and right, up and down, cutting its way in the shade of the great trees, whose tall branches met and entwined above it like an old, tattered roof. It must have been very pleasant during hot summer days, when the sunlight sifted through the foliage without heating the air. But even now, despite the overcast sky, the forest was a marvel

of colours: from green to brilliant yellow, patched with orange and scarlet fading into a mellow copper. Every now and then a gust of wind tousled the leaves at the top, throwing them into a frenzy of movement that rippled through the canopy, shaking off the weak ones to add new layers to the brittle carpet. Down at their level it was just a soft, whistled whisper and, besides their voices, only the muffled clapping of hooves and the occasional calls of unseen birds broke the silence.

Some of the oldest trees, giants with thick boughs and twisted bodies, had sharp excrescences growing in their cracks and hollows, as if they had tried to heal them. Small and clustered like miniature icicles, they were so inconspicuous, the way they matched the colour of the bark, that an untrained eye would have easily missed them. But Kiran drew Val's attention as though he had discovered a treasure.

"Bless me!" escaped a little louder from the doctor's lips. He threw a quick glance towards their companions and pulled closer to take a better look. "*Suuri?* I haven't seen these in a long time."

His son nodded, raising a finger to the ear that said *listen*. "They need true silence. Absence of sound. That's rare... Imagine this place at night."

"Something wrong?" Bran's voiced had a faint echo.

The others stopped as well. And only then it hit them that everything around was still and disturbingly quiet. They shivered.

"No, no," said Val, moving, "carry on!" When he believed they were not heard, he resumed the conversation. "I'm astonished how many they are. Imagine what must be deeper inside." A thought stroke him. "Could this be a Blessed Ground?"

Kiran was glowing. "Not right here, but I feel there is one somewhere in these hills. Do you know even some of the mushrooms are, in fact, a kind of *fenari?*"

"Really?"

"They probably feed on decaying vegetation." A tender smile flourished on his lips. "The forest is very old. It brings back memories." Just as he said it the nightmares of the last weeks crept into his mind, tainting those memories, and his smile faded. Something shifted inside him.

"What a pity we cannot explore," said Val with regret. Then he noticed the

change in his son. “Is *he* still sleeping?”

“...I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“Last time he woke up, his presence was almost physical. I felt him pushing me aside in my own body, taking control of it. Now... well, at some point I’ve become aware of another consciousness, besides mine. As though he perceives things by himself, instead of through me... I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“Through you... I wonder how he does that. Though it is said he is always aware, it doesn’t feel so.”

“He most likely is, but in a way which *I am not aware of.*”

“Nor anyone else. Nothing feels particularly odd about you.”

Kiran’s mouth smiled against his feelings. “Aside from those traits which people find so unsettling?”

“They get used to those. I meant something which could not be explained.”

“Perhaps it’s because when he sleeps I’m unable to sense his presence, to the point I completely forget he exists. I’m just me... However, now I feel there are two minds inside one body. I am aware of both of us, but I don’t feel him coming forwards. It’s so strange.”

“Will he?”

“I don’t think so. I hope not. It is probably the place that roused his consciousness, not danger. But let’s not worry and give him reasons to.”

“Would he be safer on a Blessed Ground?”

“It crossed my mind, but I don’t feel him... inclined towards this place. It’s almost as though he were just an observer—interested enough to be awake, but otherwise passive. Whether I like it or not, I feel we should not stop yet.”

Val’s chest tightened. Perhaps they should have gone elsewhere. Alone. But where? At least Fiodhin was guarded.

“Val, I don’t hate it as much as I thought. Truly! Even the company is not so bad.”

Val searched his son’s face for a moment. “Just be careful,” he said. “Next time something unusual happens, don’t keep it to yourself.” Then he changed the subject, speaking in his usual voice so as not to raise suspicions.

None of the words had reached other ears, but not just because they had been

spoken in low voices or because they rode at the back. Their companions were city folk, they were not accustomed to wilderness. That place, despite its undeniable beauty, had an eeriness which made their skin crawl. It was as if they had stumbled upon a world where no man had set foot before. They had resumed talking, suddenly conscious and uncomfortable with their own voices, but it was only when they were well into the stories that they grew a little louder and livelier. And kept talking until they minds were so engaged, they were aware of the silence no more.

It was well past noon, probably, but it was hard to tell. In Ardaena the bells were tolling the hours, but over the past few days they had been forced to rely on the sun. Now even that was missing. Since morning the scenery had changed too little. Trees were older, mostly beeches and oaks with massive trunks and twisted roots covered with a soft layer of moss, their crowns shading the ground almost completely; there was more detritus and different bird songs, if any. But no creature, wild or otherwise, had crossed their path, and, although the road had not turned into some broken footpath—as they half-expected, half-feared—the perspective had been invariably narrow. No clearing to get a glimpse of the larger landscape, nor thinning of trees where they could see the sky properly. Fortunately the stories had lifted their spirits. They rode in twos and, between walking and trotting and a couple of brief breaks, the pairs shuffled. Talking kept their minds busy, but every time they stopped, their voices sunk almost to whispers.

There was nothing for horses to feed upon—their attempts to chew on bark or acorns were gently, but firmly discouraged—but they were allowed to drink from a few puddles they encountered, where rainwater had pooled in shallow depressions on the road. None of the men were really hungry; the thought, alone, of lingering too much in one place, in that seemingly endless forest, made them lose their appetite. They did, however, chew on some of the farmer's apples. The tasty, sour-sweet flesh proved a decent substitute for water, helping them save the provisions.

“Kiran, are you listening?”

Exhausted... painful... huff, huff, huff...

“Kiran!”

Frightening... this place... huh? That sound! What was that? Thump... thump... badump...

“Son!” Val’s firm grip on his arm brought him back. “Where’s your mind?” Then lower, “Is it *him*?”

“No, no, he is quiet, but... I sense someone behind us.”

Instinctively, Val turned to look. His son, too. There was nobody. They were riding last again. *To watch your backs*, Kiran had teased them. In truth it was so they could speak without being heard if they wished so.

“Are you sure?”

Huff, huff, huff...

“Yes.”

“Hm, perhaps other travellers,” surmised Val. “This is a road, after all.”

“Hardly used.”

“But not abandoned. It’s unexpectedly clean.” Val threw another look over his shoulder. “Are you sure it was not an animal? There must be many in a place like this.”

“Horses.”

“Ah! Travellers, then... Strange, though, that you sensed their presence when none of us has heard anything. There must be a good distance between us.”

Indeed, how—oh, I see. “It must be the place. The nearness of a Blessed Ground and *his* consciousness must have augmented my perception.”

“Ah, yes, we should have expected this,” said his father. They had never been in similar conditions and the effect was exciting his curiosity. “Very interesting. Tell me—”

“Val! I don’t sense them. Only their horses.” An unpleasant emotion was growing in him.

Val frowned. “How is that possible?”

“I don’t know,” said Kiran. His heart was beating a little faster.

“I’m sure there is an explanation.”

“Such as?”

“Well, first of all, this has never happened before. Secondly...” Val thought for a moment, trying to find a logical answer. “Secondly, animals cannot keep their emotions in check, as people do. And horses are not forest creatures, places

like this can distress them. It's not strange that you sensed them first."

It was a reasonable explanation, however... the same sense of danger he had in his dreams was making his way into his heart again. But if there were such a danger, would *he* not respond to it? Yet *he* was not stirring. *Don't go there*, Kiran commanded his mind. *Think rationally*.

Huff, huff... thump... thump... thump...

"Perhaps you're right," he answered, pushing away his fears.

"We might even meet at the end of the day. Perhaps ride together tomorrow." Val winked. "The more, the merrier."

"I know someone who would not share that sentiment."

They rode in silence for a while. Val's arguments were comforting, but there was still a bad feeling whirring inside him like a pesky insect.

"It's strange. It feels as if they came out of nowhere," Kiran voiced his concerns. "We rode half a day alone and now, poof! They're here."

"Nonsense. People do not appear out of thin air."

"Of course not, but there is only one road... The horses are tired, their breath is heavy."

"You think they caught up with us?"

"It feels so."

"That could imply they are pursuing... We must tell Bran. If you are right, it could pose a problem."

Kiran's head jerked back. "Tell him what? That I believe we are being followed—never mind we don't see or hear anything—because I, somehow, *sense* other horses on the road? How does this sound to you?"

"It doesn't matter, he has to know. What if they are highwaymen?"

"But... he will just think I'm crazy. You too, for believing me."

"Since when does that bother you?"

"It always has."

"My boy," Val's tone softened, "I think by now he suspects a thing or two. Whatever his feelings about it, he has agreed for us to join them. That says something about him."

"He doesn't trust me."

"Of all people I expect you to be a wiser and finer judge of characters. I'm sure you felt his heart. Don't let pride cloud your reason." The men in front of

them looked a little more spirited, but he did not need his son's senses to tell they were anxious. "Whatever happens here concerns all of us."

Kiran followed his gaze. "Let's not alarm them, yet. I might be mistaken." He was not. And his father was right, but he was not prepared to go to a man like Bran with that sort of ridiculously sounding claim.

Val smiled at that, but did not object. His son had to learn to overcome his sentiments.

Thump, thump, badump...

"A word, please," said Kiran, coming to Bran's left side.

To his right Bert took the hint and slowed down, waiting for Val.

"Yes?"

"Um, we are being followed... possibly." *Very convincing!*

"What?" Bran looked over his shoulder. Needless to say there was nothing to see. But the view was very limited as it was, both forwards and backwards. "By whom?"

"I don't know, I didn't see them." Kiran felt a knot in his stomach.

"Riders or carts?"

"Riders." His thighs tightened.

Bran listened, but besides their voices and the rustled steps of their horses, he heard nothing. "Did you hear them?"

"No." He clenched the reins harder.

"Then how do you know?"

Kiran took a slow breath. "Because I sense we are not alone. We have not been for the last hour, at least."

"You *sense*?"

Anyone would have had the same reaction, but coming from this man it felt much worse. The captain had no idea how hard he had fought his own resentment and pride just to tell him this, knowing he will not be believed. Because he had to say it. Because if something bad were to happen, it would affect all of them.

"Don't look at me that way," Kiran defied him, "I know how it sounds. Call it intuition if you wish, or a gift—whichever you prefer—but know that I am certain."

“Could you elaborate on that?”

Certainly not. There was no explanation he could offer without revealing too much. Bran and his men might have been trustworthy, but this was a different matter altogether. This was his secret, which he and Val had spent a decade hiding. He dreaded revealing it to anyone. But the question was hanging between them, waiting for an answer. What would Val have said? *Damn it, Val, you knew he would not believe me!*

Bran was measuring him with a mixture of curiosity, disbelief and suspicion, in various proportions. And the longer he waited, the more suspicion surpassed his other feelings.

“Would you have questioned him, had Val come to you?” asked Kiran instead, raising his chin.

Bran gritted his teeth. Damn the brat, he was right about that. Had Val come to him, his first concern would have been their safety, but because it was Kiran, he was dismissing the claim without further consideration, instead wondering about the brat's sanity or, worse, his intentions. It was a reflex reaction. A weakness. *Gift, you say.* He recalled their first night, when Kiran's hands and words had soothed eleven horses like a spell. A *skill*, he had called it. Bran had seen skilled men before and none of them were that talented. And what about their first meeting in Ardaena? He had good instincts and they told him there was something queer, almost uncanny about this person. He was clever and knew how to hide it, though, which made him all the more dangerous. As if that awful personality of his were not enough! And yet... although the dislike was clearly mutual, for Kiran had discreetly kept his distance—which was very convenient—he had been kind to his men and honest, to a degree. Had he not helped them ever since they met again, in his home village, without requesting anything in return? Perhaps he deserved a little credit.

“How many?”

“I'm not sure... less than us, I should say.”

“Suppose you are right,” conceded Bran. “What is so unusual? This is the only road, so if other travellers are heading east, it is either us following them or them following us.”

“Yes.”

“I see no problem.”

"Were it not for the fact I have not sensed anyone since morning, be it in front or behind."

"I'm sorry, but—"

"Nor have we seen any other people before reaching the forest."

"We would not have if they were already inside."

"They are behind," Kiran said flatly. "If you find it so difficult to take my word for it, consider the fact I would not have come to you if it were not true. My self-esteem would forbid it."

That was probably the brat's most valid argument. "What are you saying? That they rode faster than us?"

"Much faster."

"They could be in a hurry."

"We are pressed for time, but we do not exhaust our horses. So far there has been too little water, nothing for them to graze on and, despite your men's anxiety, you kept a steady pace."

That caught Bran on the wrong foot. "Don't you find this place disturbing?"

"We spend a lot of time in the woods."

"I've seen woods before, but none of them were so quiet. How do you explain the fact we didn't hear them?"

"Either they heard us and slowed down, or they are not close enough, I cannot say which. But if my suspicion is correct, we will not hear them until they decide to reveal themselves."

Bran stared at the road in front of him, not knowing what to believe. However strong his impulse to dismiss Kiran's assertion, he realized it was not entirely impossible. Having unexpected company, that is. Not in that place. It was the fact only Kiran had become aware of it—*sensed* it; what did that really mean?—that made it questionable. But what if he was right? Many folk wandered the roads and not all of them were friendly. All they had to do was stay alert and be prepared, which they should have anyway. Would have, had they not believed that road forsaken. He could inquire about the other matter later. He pulled his horse to a stop and turned to the others.

"Please refrain from making unnecessary comments," he said in a low, yet commanding voice.

"I was not going to," Kiran replied curtly.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Bredan.

"We might have company."

"What? Who? We haven't met a living soul since we left the village this morning."

"Maybe other travellers," suggested Bert. "This is supposed to be a shortcut."

"Or highwaymen."—The men turned to Val, startled—"A place like this would make perfect hunting ground."

They had completely ignored that likelihood. All they had been worrying about during the last hours was the forest itself and whatever might have inhabited it.

"Perfect lair, more likely," said Bredan. "Are you saying they are following us?"

"I am saying it's a possibility," replied Val with calm.

"Just what we needed," muttered Ceri. "I hate this place. A bit of wilderness my arse."

"But how can we be followed and not hear it?" asked Bert. "It's so quiet in here! Kiran, did you hear them?"

All eyes turned to Kiran. He shifted uncomfortably in the saddle.

"I, um—"

"Shhh!" Bran raised a hand and everyone fell silent, searching around with disquietude. The sound of falling leaves echoed in their ears... A branch cracked somewhere... A pair of wings fluttered... A tail swished.

"What?" they whispered.

"Nothing," said Bran. "I'm just making a point."

"That we have been... loud?" asked Bredan. "Distracted?"

"Yes. We assumed no one else would come this way and allowed irrational fears to distract us. It's a forest, nothing more."

"It's eerie," grumbled Ceri.

"It's old," retorted Kiran. "These oaks were acorns many generations before us."

"But the road is smooth and clear," pointed out Val. "Had anything been amiss, don't you think the farmer would have warned us?"

"What about wild animals? Surely there must be."

"This is not the mountains, Bert," said Bran. "There are no dangerous animals." He did not know that, of course, but neither the doctor, nor his son denied.

"That still doesn't explain why we heard nothing," insisted Ceri.

"We never listened for people," replied the captain. "Enough with this, we are wasting time."

Bredan glanced at Kiran, who averted his eyes. "What do we do now, Captain? Wait to see who they are?"

"We keep moving. This doesn't change anything, except we'll be more cautious. As we should have been."

"Any idea how long before we get out of here?"

"Not too soon, I'm afraid," said Val. "Our host said it's a two days' journey to the next village, most of it through the forest."—There were a couple of gasps—"But there is a glade, he said, where travellers spend the night."

"Where? I've seen nothing but damn trees!" Ceri had lost his calm demeanour hours ago.

"What if we don't find it before dark? I can't even tell the time of day," said Bert.

"Pull yourselves together!" snapped Bran. "If you can't keep your heads now, what will you do in Fiodhin?"—The men swallowed their words—"Valan, how long, would you say, before we cannot see anymore?"

Val thought for a moment. With the sun behind heavy clouds and the sky partly hidden by foliage, anyone with less experience would have been utterly confused. "Two, maybe three hours till sunset, but it's just a guess. Mind you, forests are much darker than open fields. We must camp earlier than that."

"Then let's move. I'd rather not sleep among trees." Bran threw his men a confident look, to which they nodded firmly, and glanced at Kiran before kicking his horse.

They took off at a quick trot, then sped to a canter, as if some invisible enemy were breathing down their necks. But shortly afterwards the sloped road forced them to slow down and let the horses catch their breath. They were tired and despondent. Not because they feared undesirable company—they were soldiers after all—but the talk had stirred all their other qualms and the thought of spending the night and another day there had ruined their mood again. Talking

did not seem as good an idea as before. Instead their eyes searched around more often and the ears strained to catch any sound. The wind had died and, in the silence which enveloped them like a thick blanket, the flutter of unseen birds and the brittle sound of dry leaves reverberated in their heads, making their hearts stop. Yet they heard no hooves behind.

About two more hours in the ride, as their hopes of finding the camping place before dark were diminishing with each step, the forest thinned and then suddenly opened in front of them. On both sides the line of trees receded, encircling a large, almost flat glade—a meadow, at what seemed to be the top of the hill—only to meet again on the other side and escort the road through, yet again, more forest. The sight of open sky dispelled a growing feeling of oppression, as if the canopy had been crushing them under its weight, and they burst into nervous laughter. The light was weaker than they were hoping, but no traces of sunset tinted the sky above their limited horizon, to give them an inkling about time. Nevertheless they could see much better and the clouds appeared to be thinning.

Tall, yellow grass and other weeds and flowers past their prime covered the entire place, swaying in the gentle wind, which seemed trapped in a continuous movement between the forest's tall walls. Inside the air had grown almost still, but the meadow was, literally, a breath of fresh air. Without towering trees to compete with and plenty of sun during the day, hawthorns and hazels trimmed the irregular edges, along with smaller shrubs throwing their slender branches towards light. Other shrubs were scattered about, thick and thorny and bearing small fruits. Trails of trodden grass crisscrossed the glade, the first clear evidence that wild animals wandered those hills, though it was hard to tell their kind. A solitary oak stood in the middle and the road took a turn left, passing some twenty feet from it, then fell slightly to the right before disappearing in the dark of forest on the other side. Grass was shorter there, as if many a creature had taken shelter, over the years, under the old tree. It would be their place for the night, for it offered a good view over the entire glade and cover, lest it rained again. And, to their immense surprise, there were twigs and bits of wood scattered around and traces of old fires on the road.

“Now you see that the farmer was right. Let's set up camp before we run out

of light,” said Bran, hopping off his horse.

They followed his example, stretching their stiffened legs. Still no hooves behind them. The glade was silent as a grave, save for the swishing sounds of swaying grass and the rustle of leaves. But now they were in the open and had proof the place was not forsaken. They tethered the horses to the shrubs along the road, leaving them to graze in peace. At the roots of the oak they spread the blankets and the cloaks on top of them—although the wind had dried the grass, underneath the ground was still damp. All that was left was to look for water and firewood, but some of them were not too keen on going back into the forest. Kiran volunteered for the task, together with his father, and Bran joined them, leaving the other three to keep an eye on the camp. But instead of going back, they went to search the forest on the other side, both because they knew there was no water where they came from and because, if anyone was indeed following them, they would avoid meeting them unprepared.

“Well?” asked Bredan, more than half an hour later.

“Fates bless that man for gifting us with the bag of apples,” answered Val, treading a patch of grass and dropping his load. Despite the effort his breath was only slightly quicker than usual. “We found no water. I’m not surprised, though, we are sitting on a hilltop. Water would be much lower.”

“Saving our provisions was good thinking,” said Bran, appreciative. He was dragging a larger branch they had freed from a lightning struck tree.

“We took the horses to that puddle on the road,” said Bredan, “but I wonder if that will be enough.”

“There is another one a few feet from the edge,” said Kiran behind them, unloading his own harvest of firewood. “And towards morning the grass will be wet with dew. It will suffice to keep them going. It’s impossible not to come across a spring or a stream tomorrow.” The familiar activity had kept his mind busy and he was more self-possessed.

“The good news is the wood is reasonably dry,” said Val. “If we scratch off some of the bark and start a fire, it should burn. This fungus makes good tinder. It will spare mine.” He produced a large thing that looked nothing like a mushroom—shaped like a fan, thick and hard—which he had found inside a rotten log. “But we could use more wood.”

"I'll bring that one we saw close to the road," said Kiran and left in a hurry.

He had to because the light was fading, making it difficult to see in the forest. The others began to break and cut the wood into smaller pieces, sorting them according to Val's instructions.

"But if anyone is following," said Bert out of the blue, snapping a twig, "won't fire just give us away?" So far nothing indicated that, but what if?

"It's not as if we were hidden," answered Bredan. "At least we can warm a little."

Indeed, the fresh wind was chilly and, now their cloaks were not hanging on their shoulders anymore, their bodies were beginning to shiver. Fire would hold animals at distance, Val was about to say, but he changed his mind. No use in distressing them when he doubted they could keep it burning all night, anyway.

Kiran was returning, straining with another large branch, and Bran went to help him. *Could you not have sent someone else?*

"Any change?" asked Bran, making a slight chin motion towards the forest.

Kiran halted, surprised. "Oh, now you believe me?"

"I don't want to take any chances."

"A true captain."

Bran almost regretted asking. After all nothing had happened and now they were setting camp in the open. If anyone else was there, looking for a place to sleep, they would join them under the old oak. But if they were hostile, they would try to take them by surprise. Which would fail now that he and his men were aware of the possibility. Whatever the case, soon they would find out if they worried for good reason or not. Why was he exposing himself to the brat's impertinence?

On both sides the forest swallowed the road like a hungry, bottomless mouth. Twilight had drained the colours from the glade, but they could still see. The forest, on the other hand, was almost pitch black. *Thump... thump... badump...* The heartbeats were still there, in the dark, not very far from the edge. Not moving. The glade resonated with the sounds of blades chopping wood.

"They stopped," said Kiran in a quiet voice. He glanced towards the captain. "It doesn't take much subtlety to see you question my claim. Why bother asking?"

Bran took hold of the other side of the branch and pulled. People usually

found it hard to guess his feelings. Was he so obvious when it came to this person? He should check himself better. “The self-conceit argument was convincing.”

“I’m certain I said esteem.”

“I know what you said.”

“Suit yourself.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence, both displeased with the other’s company. *As long as he is alert, I’m fine with it*, thought Kiran. *We don’t have to like each other*. He had better things to worry about. Such as why he kept sensing the horses, but not their riders.

It took a bit of effort to kindle the fire, but eventually they succeeded. They had picked a flat spot on the road, where the mud was harder, and Val had built a bed of short branches, to keep it away from moisture. Other pieces were placed around the bed like a wall, shielding it from the wind. That was also a good way to dry the wood, so they kept replacing that which they fed to the fire with new one. The thickest parts, which they could not cut, were used as stools and, shortly thereafter, they were seated around a small, but well burning campfire, collecting their thoughts. Not a moment too soon, for night had finally fallen over the land. By then the clouds had grown thin, only a shredded veil, and a few stars were peeking through the holes. The moons were not up yet. The fire cast a bright light, making the glade look even darker, but the pleasant heat and the crackling of bark eased their minds, bringing to attention the emptiness in the stomachs. They had not had lunch, only apples. With precious little water the dry food was hard to swallow, so the mushrooms they had picked up earlier in the day came in handy. No herbs or salt on them, just plain mushrooms spiked on dry twigs. Sweet and tender in flesh, with a subtle nutty flavour, they had a richness of taste that needed no addition, nor improvement. They ate slowly, wasting nothing, and talked about various subjects. And kept talking and telling stories long after they finished dinner, until sleep began to court their eyes and some were making visible efforts to keep their chins up.

Nothing bad happened and no one came to their camp.

Bran planned the watch, including everyone. Kiran said he had no trouble staying awake a few more hours. Bredan seconded him, so they were assigned

with the first watch. Bran would follow, with Ceri, and Val with Bert towards morning. They would also have to feed the fire—just keep it alive, until they were out of wood.

The ghostly light of the waning moons barely illuminated the glade, giving it an otherworldly appearance. It was almost worse than before, with all those shadows crawling from the forest, trembling as if they were alive. Strange sounds sometimes broke the silence—an ominous hoot or a low churr, a flutter of wings, a twig snapping and other noises they could not account for. Just loud enough to startle them. Even the horses seemed uneasy, the way they raised their heads and blew every now and again. By contrast, the cool air indulged their smell with sweet, sleep inducing scents, when all their other senses were alert.

Bredan threw a piece of wood in the fire, sending a small swarm of sparks in the air. “You don’t seem too impressed with this place,” he said, wrapping himself in the cloak.

“Are you afraid?” asked Kiran with a playful side-glance, stretching his palms closer to the fire.

“A little daunted, perhaps. Are you not?”

“I like the woods.” Other things were daunting him.

“Hm... so do other creatures.”

“People are more dangerous than wild animals.” Between the bright fire and the dimly lit glade his eyes needed a few moments to adjust, but beyond the first line of trees the darkness was impenetrable. *Thump... thump... badump...* Fearful hearts throbbing in the shadows, and other, smaller but stouter, up in the canopy or prowling on the ground. “Animals are honest. They do what they do to live, nothing more.”

“Whereas people are deceitful.” He followed Kiran’s gaze. “Is that why you keep looking there? You still believe someone is watching?”

When Bran had broken the news, he had not mentioned him. “It’s possible.”

“Because you can *sense* that.”

That tone was difficult to interpret and Kiran stared at him, wondering. As always the handsome, friendly smile, a little less confident that evening, adorned Bredan’s face—*I bet few resist that*—but his eyes had that roguish glint Kiran had noticed a few times. A misleading man. He glanced over his shoulder—the

others were snoring—then turned his gaze back to Bredan. “Does a captain share *everything* with his second?”

“No, but a very close friend may... Your little disclosure is puzzling him.”

“Ah! And he asked you to find out the truth.”

Bredan chuckled. “That is unfair. My opinion of you is very good.”

As opposed to your captain's? “Yet you are very inquisitive.”

“People fascinate me.”

“Not their secrets?”

“That too, but I have no ulterior motives. It's just curiosity.”

Perhaps Bredan was not entirely honest, but Kiran felt no malice or hidden intentions. He turned his eyes to the fire. “You would not believe it if I told you.”

“I think of myself as fairly open-minded. I'm willing to try.”

The fire crackled and popped. The reflection of the flames seemed to have set Kiran's eyes ablaze. “Do you believe an animal can sense your emotions? Fear, for instance.”

“Some can. Horses do.”

“It's the same.”

“You can sense fear?”

“I can sense the emotions of others. It's a form of... sympathy.”

“Hm... I heard about this sort of sympathy before—never seen it, though—but you seem to possess more than that.” He poked the embers with a twig, watching the transient splendour of the sparks. “Did you ever sense ours?”

Kiran threw a wood in the fire. “Some of them.”

“You could have given Bran this answer, you know?”

“Because it sounds better than a gift?”

Bredan laughed softly. “Less vague, I suppose. So, you sensed the emotions of the people following us?”

“Of their horses.”

“... You sensed horses, not people.”

“Horses don't wander the roads without riders.”

“True. Maybe they somehow hid their emotions,” said Bredan, half joking, “just to trick you.”

“Perhaps—” Kiran froze. Merciful Fates! That was why he only sensed their

horses, because they hid their emotions. How come he did not realize that sooner? The implication was horrifying: they hid from him. They were no highway robbers, they were looking for him. His heart sunk.

A gust of wind shook the branches of the old tree and the leaves rustled violently. Another twig snapped. Danan raised his head and snorted. Sylph answered. Kiran turned to look over his shoulder. A gloved hand met his face, covering his mouth and nose with a cloth. It had a sweet, honey-like scent. *Lorain oil!* He grabbed the hand, trying to pull it away, but a sudden feebleness made the attempt useless. His mind was quickly fading. There was a low grunt to his right, followed by a thud as Bredan fell to the ground. *Too late*, screamed his mind, just before he slipped out of consciousness. Then all was black.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Revelation

There was nothing: no world, no time and no senses. Just despair, a deep feeling of utter despair. A lonely consciousness drifting in a vast expanse of nothing, crying out its helplessness and agony in vain, for it had no voice. And even if it had, there would be nothing to carry the sound. And even if it were, no one and nothing would hear it. How much time had passed since he was drifting like that? What happened to the others? What happened to the world? Was it the end already? Was this how the end was like? The end of all things...

He felt another consciousness. And then he saw. He had no eyes, yet he saw a drop of golden light. He had no body, yet he felt warmth. He had no heart, yet he felt hope. And the black expanse of nothing brightened. Drops of golden light came into existence, scattered sparks of life converging to create distinct shapes. The world took form, but not the way he remembered it. It was supposed to be midnight, but this world was bright and all shapes were golden and distorted, all living things throbbing with light. It was as though he could see *sidaar* flowing through them like blood through veins. As though he were watching through someone else's eyes? And he understood. He was awake and that was his world, but it was not him watching.

It did not matter, as long as he could see again. And he saw Val and his companions under the old oak, wrestling throbbing, distorted shapes. But he was moving away from them, rocking up and down. Someone was carrying him away. He blinked. It was a strong man, but he had no emotions.

Because they hid them, a voice whispered.

Of course! That was how they tricked him. *Them*. The man had thrown him over his shoulder, like a sack of potatoes, and was striding towards the forest. He looked towards the camp, but the other consciousness turned his eyes downwards, as if searching for a way to escape. Ah, *he* was controlling his body! No matter, he had to free himself first. *There*, he thought, *that knife on his belt!* He reached under the man's arm with his left hand, slowly, careful not to touch him, until he felt the bone handle against the open palm. In a swift move he pulled it free and drove the blade in the man's side, close to the armpit, before the bastard even realized his load had come to his senses. A loud cry of pain, the

body shuddered and the man fell to his knees, dropping him on the ground. He spat a curse in a tongue all too familiar to Kiran. He turned, snarling like a wounded animal, his face disfigured with rage and pain, and pulled the blade free. And with a savage growl he charged. Kiran stepped aside, avoiding the blow effortlessly. He pulled out his own knife and, with unnatural speed and nimbleness, he leaped behind the man, pulled his head back and slashed his throat, all in one, graceful move, as if dancing. The man staggered, choking with blood and gurgling horribly, and fell.

I'm sorry, whispered Kiran inside.

I'm sorry, echoed the other voice.

The choking ceased and the body went limp.

From the camp came sounds of fierce fighting. Val's voice was desperately calling his name. *Val*, thought Kiran, frightened. But *he* turned away from it and started towards the forest with long strides.

No, no! We must go back! We must help them! Kiran tried to command his own body, but it seemed he could not do that unless *he* allowed him.

We must live, came the answer.

But they will die! cried Kiran.

Many die. Others are born. Sidaar will flow if we live. You and I must live. It was not cruelty, it was the truth. *He*, too, was in pain, as though his were a reflection of Kiran's.

Please! How can I live if they die? pleaded Kiran. He was crying, not just inside, but his eyes were tearing. His body still responded to his emotions, but not to his will. *I need Val's help to keep you safe.* They were close to the forest. *I will fight you if I have to, but I will not lose him, too!*

He stopped, as if weighing the choices.

We can save them, together, said Kiran, hopeful. *And they will help us stay alive.*

He felt Kiran's love and pain, and the terrible despair at losing someone precious to him. He felt all that and more, and he relented. *They* stormed back to the camp like a tempestuous wind, barely touching the ground. The cries and the clamour of blades had frightened the horses, who were trampling the grass and squealing, trying to free themselves from the tethers. Kiran saw Val's glowing form stagger and fall. He screamed. And it came out. Loud, almost like a roar,

deep and wild and wholly unknown to him. The sort of sound only an enraged beast could make. It frightened him, but the others froze in horror, friend and foe alike. Their distorted shapes throbbed with golden light, ever brighter as their emotions grew stronger.

They were staring at Kiran, unable to move or make a sound, as if they saw a daemon. He may have looked the same as they knew him, but that voice was not his. There was fire burning in his golden eyes and he exuded a power so great, they felt it creeping on their skin, thick and oily, permeating their bodies, flowing through their limbs and drowning their hearts in fear.

They fell to the knees near Val's limp body. There was still life in him. His golden light was weaker, but warm and throbbing. Inside, Kiran almost wept. *Their* eyes searched the camp, blazing with anger and pain. Another body lay tangled in the blankets—*Ceri*, gasped Kiran—and his light was also weak, but glowing, and yet another was spread in the grass, bloody and twisted. That one's light had almost faded, cold and still. The others were staring at *them* in motionless stupor, as though time had stopped.

The memory of their first meeting flared in Bran's mind with vivid details and the sudden realization—the relief—he had not imagined, he had not been mad all that time, was like a splash of cold water. It pulled him back to his senses before anyone else and he wasted no time, pushing his stunned opponent to the ground. Chaos ensued. There were screams and curses and the strangers pushed Bert and Bredan out of their way, trying to escape. The downed man made an attempt to get up, but Bran sank the sword in his chest. Bert lost his balance and toppled onto his back, tripping up one of the attackers. Bredan stroke that one hard in the back, then once more to make sure he stayed down. The other found himself face to face with the daemon, staring in those beautiful, terrifying eyes. He shrieked and dropped his blade, and his neck snapped under Kiran's hands like a dry twig. And then all was silent again. That *thing* in Kiran was staring at them, motionless, and they were breathing heavily, their chests and shoulders heaving, their hearts thundering in their ears, waiting for it to fall upon them. Instead it rushed to Val's side, gently turning him on his back and

brushing his face with trembling fingers. The power that was so overwhelming just moments ago was turning into a warm, gentle heartbeat, and the golden eyes were filled with tears.

Thank you, whispered Kiran. *He* did not answer, but Kiran felt a great fondness and something akin to a smile—as if the outcome pleased *him* just as well—before the other consciousness drifted into sleep, releasing the hold on his body. The golden shapes faded and the world came back to what he knew: a night with waning moons and a glade with an old oak in the middle. Val moved his hand, then moaned and opened his eyes.

“Bless me!” said Kiran, laughing through the tears. “Your defence skills have rusted, old man.”

“Drest was right, I should have done something about that mouth,” rasped Val, then smiled.

The glade was the same as before. Only the wind had softened, but the moons-light was just as weak and the forest noises just as unnerving in the quietness of the night. But the violent encounter had dulled their senses and, strange though it seemed, they now found the quietness comforting.

They were all in one piece, thank goodness. Both Val and Ceri were back on their feet, but Ceri was a little confused. He had been hit rather hard on the head and appeared to have some injured ribs. One of the attackers had jumped on him from the oak, where two of them had been lying in wait for Fates knew how long. How they had managed to come so close and climb the tree without their notice they could not understand, but it proved those had not been mere robbers. Val had been hit in the stomach—the hard blow had wrung the air out of his lungs, making him faint—and had a few scratches and bruises—nothing life threatening. The other three were looking better; a little beaten and dishevelled, but otherwise fine. Bredan’s head was throbbing from a blow he had received, when the bastards had snatched Kiran, and Bert had a slash on his left arm, which, according to Val, was not exceptionally deep and would heal completely before he was ready for marriage. Although Kiran was unscathed, for reasons easy to understand he let his father see to their wounds.

They cleaned the camp in silence. The horses had calmed down, Kiran had

lent a hand with that. One had managed to break free and he found him at the northern edge of the glade. The fire pit had crumbled during the fight, but they rebuilt it and Bredan succeeded in rekindling the fire, using the hot coals still smouldering on their burnt bed. Then they moved the dead bodies away from the camp, after reluctantly searching them for anything useful, lining them on the grass close to where lay Kiran's first kill. Because they were all tired and shaken from the event, and even more so by the extraordinary transformation they had witnessed in him—none of them felt ready to look him in the eye or speak to him yet, but he could not resent them for that—he went by himself in the forest to look for the other horses, the ones left by their attackers. He found them less than half an hour away from the camp, tethered to the trees and rather nervous. They were hungry, so he brought them to the second puddle, then let them graze a little further from their own.

They searched the travel packs and found food and water, dry blankets, coin, knives, tinder, a map and other sundries, but no information as to who those people were or why they were following them. Or, indeed, why had Kiran not been able to sense them. He found the answer himself, when he searched the bodies again. Hanging around one of the dead men's neck was a soft leather pouch, half the size of his palm. It had escaped his notice during the fight, but now he felt something about it. He opened the pouch to find a few dry, purple leaves. *Odari. I should have known it!* Of course he should have, the presence of feya was the only possible explanation. Of all feya, *odari* were the ones feeding on emotions. They could take several shapes, but most seemed to favour attaching themselves to various trees. For reasons unknown, when dried their original colour turned into a light purple shade. They were helpful in treating melancholy and depression in people—or any emotional condition in any creature, for that matter—but one had to use them with care, because they could leave a person emotionless if kept close to the heart, for as long as they were borne. And were just as potent dried as they were fresh, for drying did not affect the feya. Strange, though, that they could not suppress the horror his transformation aroused. He sighed. They were fortunate only the men had carried *odari* on them, otherwise he would never had been alerted to their presence. But that showed they had been prepared to look for him better than he had expected. They had known about his senses and had tricked him. What they

had not known was what happened once he was in danger. That had been his saving grace.

“Those men were no highway robbers,” broke the silence Bredan. His tone was uncommonly hostile. His eyes fixed on Kiran, cold as the stone whose colour they resembled. “Do you mind explaining?”

They were sitting around the fire wrapped in their cloaks, watching the flames with hollow eyes. Despite the weariness they could not sleep. Not even lay on the blankets—that place, at the roots of the old oak, suddenly repulsed them. Val was sitting to Kiran's left. To his right, just a little further, was Bran. The captain had seated himself so to put some distance between Kiran and his men. Not for Kiran's sake, for theirs. Because they feared him, Bredan and Bert, and even him, despite having had a taste of that horror before. It was impossible not to, after feeling that tremendous power. At least Ceri had been spared the shock, he had missed most of the confrontation. And Val... well, he probably knew about *that*. One thing was clear, though: Kiran, or whoever *that* was, had no intention to harm them, for if he had, they would not be resting around the fire.

Bredan's dry question raised all the eyes. Bert and Ceri, in particular, had never seen that side of him. His eyes were darker in the shadow of the lowered brows—not their colour, their emotion—and no trace of his usual smile seamed that hard face.

Kiran met him with resolution. “No, they were not robbers. They were looking for me.”

“That I know, I was with you when they hit us.” A blow behind the head had meant to render him unconscious long enough for those men to grab the object of their interest and flee, but had failed. He had raised the alarm and had forced them to fight. “It's the reason I'm interested in.”

“Whatever their reason, Kiran is not responsible for it!” said Val in a firm tone, before his son could even answer.

Dear Val, he would have fought anyone to protect him and his secret. And did he suddenly look taller?

“I beg to differ,” Bran said coldly. “He was the only one who knew we were being followed.”

“Who *realized* that, yes, and he alerted you. Am I mistaken when I say you doubted him?”

He was not. Bran had acted upon Kiran's warning because he had had no arguments to exclude the possibility and because it had required no changes in the plan. His goal had been to reach that glade before nightfall. As to the manner in which Kiran had acquired that knowledge, he had been rather sceptical about it. What rational mind would be otherwise?

And Bredan? That conversation at the fire, just before the attack, that was his usual way of making people speak, spill out their secrets. Persuading them with pleasing manners and an appearance of acceptance, which made the others feel at ease with him. After all loosening tongues was his talent and Kiran was intriguing him. But he had been convinced the truth was more ordinary than it seemed.

Ceri and Bert had been more concerned with the forest itself.

“My son is not to blame for what happened. None of us is.” He would not admit any objections.

“Val,” Kiran placed his hand gently on his father's knee, “they have seen *him*.”

“I know they have,” said Val softer, sinking. He had not, though he wished he had. Oh, how he wished it! But that had been precisely the kind of event which would draw *him* out, the kind of event they had always tried to avoid. There was so much sadness in those sagging shoulders, so much regret in his countenance. He shook his head in helplessness. “This should not have happened. I should have thought better before leaving.”

“Seen whom?” asked Ceri, confused. No one answered him. He turned to Bert and the motion made him groan with pain. “Hey, seen whom?”

“You don't want to know,” muttered Bert, without looking at him.

“You could not prevent it. They tricked me, Val, they had *odari*. Otherwise I would have known.”

Bran cleared his throat. “I believe we deserve some explanations,” he said, softening his attitude a little. Laying blames and venting their anger would lead them nowhere. And, now that his most haunting question had finally received an answer—albeit one that exceeded his expectations—and his men were safe, he was willing to set aside his prejudices and listen.

Val sighed, long and weary, squeezing the lean hand resting on his knee. Then he straightened his back again. “The cat’s finally out of the bag. It was bound to happen.”

Kiran tried to smile for him, though he only managed a tiny stretch of lips which looked more sad than encouraging. He took a slow breath and turned to their companions, meeting their accusing eyes with adequate composure.

“Have you ever heard about Eina?”

* * *

Kiri nocked an arrow to his bow. He gripped the bow, lifted his arms and drew the string until his hand touched his right cheek, just above the chin.

“Elbows straight,” whispered Keryon. “Good. Now aim.” Kiri’s bow shifted a little. “Do you see him?”

Kiri nodded slowly. He could see the large bird along the arrow shaft, perched on that boulder about eighty feet from them, grooming its feathers unaware of the danger. He had emptied his mind and had closed his heart, so his target would not sense him. He held his breath.

“Release!” came the whispered command.

The string snapped with a whizz and the arrow sprung forwards. The bird startled and gave a short cry, before falling to the ground. Kiri lowered his bow slowly and breathed out. His chin began to tremble.

“I’m sorry,” he whimpered, blinking repeatedly because the tears were welling up in his eyes, uncontrollable. A wave of emotions flooded him and now his heart was aching.

“May the blessed Sireei embrace you in Edesil. May you become sidaar, nourish and fortify him, to protect our worlds. We humbly thank you for your sacrifice,” recited Keryon in a low voice. He turned to his child with a compassionate look. “Your first kill. You did very well.”

“My... k-kill” stuttered Kiri, dropping the bow. His body began to shake with sobs. “I didn’t want to kill him. I’m so sorry!”

“I know. But it is something you must learn.”—Kiri nodded, still sobbing—“They feel neither pain, nor fear if we strike properly. It’s important to be

prepared, to have a good aim and a steady hand, otherwise you will make them suffer needlessly. Or anger them, and then you will become the prey. So never strike unless you are resolved to kill. And never forget to thank them for the sacrifice.” He brushed the child’s hair. “In time it will be easier... Come, let’s pick him up.”

Kiri sniffled and wiped his tears. His breath was still uneven, although he was making efforts to hold back his emotions. Nobody was forcing him to do this, but every Eina, be it man or woman, knew how to hunt and shoot the bow with remarkable precision. Archery was an age-old tradition: not just a means of defence or feeding, but an exercise meant to strengthen their body and mind, improve their attention, self-control and coordination. Nowhere in the world could one find a more graceful or skilled archer than an Eina. They started training as early as yanee, first by learning posture and proper use of the bow, then by shooting at special targets made of wood and, roughly around the age of Becoming, they went hunting for the first time. Kiri had just turned fourteen and, although they could have waited a year or two, his father thought he was ready for it. The child had been excited, without realizing how his first kill would affect him. Keryon had known, because it happened to everyone, but he was confident Kiri would overcome it. It was all part of growing up.

The bird was still, its wings slightly spread. The arrow had pierced its heart, killing it instantly, the blunt, bloody tip jutting out from the back. Kiri felt his own heart stinging. A new wave of tears was threatening to blurry his vision and he fought them back. He had gone hunting with his father before, but it turned out to be very different when he was the one taking the life.

“It’s all right to cry,” said Keryon, pulling the arrow free. The body was warm, but the wound did not bleed too much.

Kiri did not touch it, he could not. He turned his head, struggling not to cry and wondering whether he would be able to eat the meal his grandmother was going to cook with that bird.

“Enough hunting for today, let’s go back.”

“Yes.”

On their way back, they made a stop in a clearing, because Keryon wanted some wood for new arrows. To keep his mind away from the dead bird lying in

the middle of the path, Kiri passed his time playing, chasing butterflies or looking for feya, while his father was searching for suitable shoots, not too far from the edge of the glade. It was a splendid spring day, with clear sky and warm, bright sun. The leaf canopy was still young and it had that extraordinary shade of green that had come to make Kiri's mouth water, because watching the goats relish the tender leaves had always made him hungry. So hungry, in fact, he had tried chewing some himself, though he had found the taste bland. But that colour still looked appetizing. Beneath the canopy, the forest floor was carpeted with bluebells and ramsons in full bloom. There was a sweet scent in the air and the violet-blue glade buzzed with bees, bumblebees and colourful butterflies, lifting Kiri's spirits. He frolicked about the place, trying to step so he would not crush the delicate flowers, crouching to smell them or watch the insects feed.

There were no feya, none that he would recognize, anyway, but he saw a couple of squirrels crossing the glade and hiding in a tall, nearby shrub. He followed them excited, searching through the thorny branches and clusters of tiny, white flowers. The squirrels were gone, but something else caught his eye and his hands froze. Hidden in the entanglement of shoots was a nest with a few eggs inside, though no bird. They were so small and beautiful, a pale green-blue with dark specks, like some stones he had once seen in Maelifeld. One egg was broken and something had come out of it, though he could not see whether it was alive or not. He pushed aside the branches, trying to reach it, but the sleeves caught on the sharp thorns, baring the skin, and scratching his arms was all he accomplished. But he was not one to give up so easily and, after struggling some more, he managed to push his way through, in a rain of white petals.

Whatever had hatched from that egg was not a chick. He knew how a hatchling looked like, naked, almost translucent, blind and utterly helpless. This one, however, had no head, no legs and no wings. It was just a lump of... something, very soft, covered with a smooth, pink skin. How had it managed to crack the shell without a beak? Perhaps it was the mother bird who had helped, but then it was strange that she had not thrown him out of the nest. Out of compassion he brushed the poor thing with his fingertip, without thinking. It was warm and it twitched under his touch, and Kiri almost cried with fright. He did not expect it to be alive. Instinct told him to leave it alone, but curiosity was much stronger and he touched it again. A heartbeat reverberated through his

finger and up his arm, all the way to his heart, shattering against his own, startling him. He touched again. Another heartbeat, then another, and another... until they matched his own and he felt his whole body drumming with the throbs of two hearts beating in unison. It was both wonderful and frightening, he had never felt that sort of connection with any creature before. As gently as he could, he pushed his fingers underneath the soft body and scooped it out of the nest, cupping his other hand protectively atop. Without anything to hold them, the branches sprung back, scratching him. The little treasure hidden in his palms, however, was safe. Had he been there his father would have scolded him for what he did, and for good reason. Not only he could harm that fragile body, but touching a hatchling could induce the mother bird to remove it from the nest herself. *But it's not a chick*, Kiri justified in his mind, *she will throw it out anyway*. No, not a chick. What lay in his palm was something far stranger and the only thing that came to his mind was... an egg yolk... of sorts.

And then it happened: a surge of feelings flooded him, so strong and sudden that his heart almost broke and he staggered, nearly dropping the thing. Fear and relief, loneliness and friendship, strangeness and familiarity, helplessness and strength, and above all, a strong desire to live. Whatever it was, that creature was calling to his mind, to his heart, asking for help, wanting to live. The moment Kiri understood what he should do it changed before his eyes, turning slick like a true egg yolk and glowing faintly from the inside, like the lanterns in their home, only weaker. Without a second thought the child sucked and swallowed it, in the same way he ate the raw eggs. And it felt just the same, sliding down his throat, smooth and slippery, only warmer and tasteless.

He looked at his hands in a daze, staring at that wet trace on his palm, trying to understand what he had done. What was that? Why did he eat it?

Because I told you to.

Kiri jumped. "Who said that? Danaa?" He heard his father's knife cutting shoots.

Who is danaa?

"Who is—who are you?" He was alone in the glade. Where did that voice come from? "Where are you?"

Inside you.

Kiri looked down, patting his stomach, his belly, his sides. "In-inside me?" He looked at his palms again and his legs folded, sending him down on the grass. *That... that thing I ate!*

You did not eat me, the voice startled him again. *You took me. And saved my life.*

"How did you—"

I'm inside. I hear your thoughts. I hear your heart.

Instinctively, Kiri clutched at his chest.

I shall not hurt you.

"What do you want?"

To live. And rest. Grow.

"Grow? Inside me?" He panicked.

Yes.

"No! I don't want that. I thought you were dying. Please, get out!"

I would have died. You saved me. I was waiting for you.

Waiting? What did it mean by that? Kiri felt warmth inside his chest, around the heart, as if something were nested there. Throbbing, warmer, warmer. Daylight grew brighter. The vibrant colours disappeared and the whole world turned to gold: the sky, the forest, the bluebells, the butterflies. All shapes looked distorted, as they glowed with golden, pulsing light, matching the rhythm of his heart.

"What's happening? What are you doing?"

I am using your eyes. It is how I see.

"No! Give them back!" He covered his eyes with the hands. They were glowing golden. "Why are you doing this?" he whimpered.

Why are you afraid? You were not afraid when you found me.

"I thought you were a dead hatchling."

I was, almost... I am tired. Coming into the world is difficult.

"Coming into the world? What do you mean?... Hey! Hey!"

The voice inside went silent. The golden glow faded, until Kiri saw nothing. He lowered his hands and opened his eyes, fearful. The sun was shining upon the blue glade and the air was buzzing with insects. *Hey! Are you there?* He waited, but there was no answer. He breathed with relief. And whether because the sun felt so pleasant on his face, or because the sweet smell of flowers and the low

hum were so comforting, he suddenly felt terribly sleepy. But why so suddenly?
Orife?

"Kiri! Let's go home!" he heard his father.

"Danaa..." he answered weakly.

"Kiri? Kiri!"

The world disappeared.

"Something is wrong," said Arryn. There was a restlessness in her heart she had not managed to subdue. "Why is he still sleeping? He is not sick. I don't understand."

"The first time I hunted myself, I felt sick for two days," said Keryon. He was calmer, though not by much.

"You did," confirmed Talian. "And you refused to eat meat for a while."

"I understand what you mean, everyone reacts differently to the first kill. But still," Arryn shook her head, "that was yesterday."

They were sitting in the main room, with their usual steaming cups of tea. The evening was cool and a small fire was burning in the hearth. Through the opening in the roof poured in damp, mossy scents, blending with the smell of burning wood and the sweet, slightly minty fragrances rising from the lanterns. The last traces of twilight were fading.

Yunal returned from Kiri's room. There was a strange look in her eyes.

"Still sleeping?" asked Arryn.

"Soundly." Yunal sat on a cushion, near her husband. "And I might have found the reason."

Arryn put the cup down and drew closer, followed by Keryon.

"He is not sick, is he?"

"I don't think so, my dear. And I'm not entirely sure of what I sensed, either."

"Sensed? But none of us sensed anything wrong."

"Not wrong, foreign." She sipped from the calming tea. "I thought this sleep was strange, very much like the orife sleep. And I reached to his heart."

"So did I," said Arryn, not understanding. "It's peaceful. And warm."

"Yes, very warm. And strong."

"Kiri is a strong child," said Keryon with pride. Talian agreed.

“Almost as if he had two hearts.”

“Two—”

“For a brief moment, I sensed two heartbeats. Nearly synchronous, but not perfectly so, as if one of them slipped out of rhythm. It happened twice... Now, I cannot be absolutely certain there is something inside him, but *if it were*, it would explain his sleep.”

“Something inside him? A parasite?”

“I cannot think of anything that we would not be able to find,” objected Keryon.

“What if it hurts him?” Arryn’s voice broke.

“I sensed no danger or malice. My dear, if we didn’t notice before, it would be because they beat at the same time. Together, in almost perfect unison. That would not happen if it wanted to hurt him.”

Talian frowned, slowly rubbing his chin. “There is only one thing that comes to mind, which is consistent with your description, but—” He paused, looking towards his grandchild’s room. “No, it cannot be, Kiri is too young.”

“What is that?”

Talian hesitated. “Vhareei.”

“What? No! Impossible!” They were all voicing their incredulity at the same time.

Kiri’s quavery voice interrupted them. “Manee!” None had heard him coming. He was standing in the opening that led to his room and his burning, golden eyes were wide with fear. “What’s happening to me?”

“*Reei ay tualain!*” blurted Talian, nearly dropping his teacup.

“King’s Host,” said Yunal, paling.

Her children almost fainted.

In a few days the whole Enma tribe knew. Not just their village, but the other ones spread along the southern borders of the Eina forests. They sent people to take the news to other tribes and, in a few weeks, every Eina, from the south to the farthest depths of the forest, in the north, knew the new king of Edesil was born. Elders from all tribes came to see the Host. It was the rarest, most important event in their culture, and not just for their kin. The future, the very existence of both worlds depended on the safe growth of the Vhareei in their

world. It was the duty of their race to protect him.

Kiri was just a child, though, and the whole matter was distressing. The thought of living almost half of his life with a strange creature inside his body alarmed him. It was a privilege, everyone told him, but he could not see it that way. The lore said many things about Hosting, but in truth nobody could tell what it was like, what he should expect, how it would affect his life—his everyday life—and his growth, because nobody knew. Such details were missing from the old stories and, since it only happened once every two thousand or more years, there was no living Eina who had met the previous Host, nor any records about their lives, for it was not in the customs of Eina to preserve their knowledge in writing.

The first three weeks after that fateful encounter had been very difficult. Kiri had often fallen asleep at the most unusual hours, only to wake up to a glowing, distorted world that was foreign to him and frightening because of it. His own vision returned to him after a while, but not before he cried and pleaded for it. He even begged the Vhareei to choose another person, when he was awake and alone in his room, although he had been told that was not possible and he knew, he could feel the king was kind and would not hurt him. What had happened during those weeks was, in fact, the attuning of the Vhareei with his host—the bonding. *Kiyun*. But, of course, Kiri was just a child and he could not understand that. The Vhareei only spoke again once, after that he remained silent. Only later Kiri understood it was not an act of stubbornness. The king himself was a newborn, a child, still weak and weakened even further by the effort to bond. He needed to rest and to learn before he could understand his host's distress. But after those weeks the bond was complete and he entered a dormant state, retreating into the farthest corners of Kiri's consciousness. Or heart? He could not say. But the world did not turn strange to his eyes anymore and Kiri felt alone again, his body his own, as it ought to be. He felt free, though he knew he was not, but he was finally able to go out without fear, play with other children, wander the forest with his family, do what he always did before. With time he almost forgot the little creature hidden inside.

"It is a marvellous thing the Vhareei was born. We are blessed, for the birth of the new king is a sign that Madara is not disturbed," said Muun, pleased. He

was the eldest of the Enma tribe, three-and-two hundred years old, and the most knowledgeable among them. "Perhaps you did not expect it, but the time is right, according to the lore."

"So the other elders said, Eli-Muun," agreed Talian. "But we cannot help thinking this is strange."

"How so?"

"The lore says Hosting is, in some ways, akin to pregnancy. So far all Hosts have been women, unless we misunderstood. Kiyun has happened after Berethis. But my grandchild is a yanee, his Ritual is not until next year. It is not decided, yet, whether he will be a boy or a girl."

Muun twisted the cup in his hands, brushing the smooth surface with knotty fingers. His hands looked as if the years had sucked out all moisture from them, leaving the soft, wrinkled skin to slide over the back of the hands and the swelled veins like a pair of very thin gloves. His face, too, was timeworn and creased, but it had not entirely lost the Eina beauty, and his eyes were clear, spirited and wise. He dressed no differently than younger men—he was old, not crippled—and wore his white hair braided in a thick plait that fell all the way to his waist.

"Indeed," he said, raising his gaze from the cup, "it is unusual. But since it happened, I can only assume the choice has already been made. Kiri shall be a girl, or else this will be the most extraordinary occurrence in our known history, and I know not whether that is a good or a bad sign."

Kiri's family exchanged gloomy looks. They were all there, his parents and grandparents, gathered in the main room to take counsel with Muun. He had been among the first to arrive from the other villages to confirm the event and had been taken in by one of the families. There was no doubt in his heart that Kiri was the King's Host, so the others he had come with had been sent to spread the news. He had stayed behind because his knowledge was valuable and much needed at a time like that.

"Now, now, do not be so gloomy! Fa-Talian, you ought to know it is not advisable to jump to conclusions without considering all the possibilities."

"My knowledge does not come close to yours, Eli-Muun, but as far as I know there have been no yanee Hosts before."

"As far as *we all* know. Precisely! And how much do we know? This is such

a rare event that perhaps long ago, long before our memory of it, it happened. We know not how old our worlds are. Or how Vhareei comes to this world, or when. Perhaps he is not always close to his chosen Host and it takes him time to find her. How can we tell? The lore says nothing about that. The way I see it, the circumstances have been favourable and the king has found his Host sooner than he hoped. Next year your grandchild will have his Ritual and all will be well.”

“So you say we should expect Kiri to be a girl?” asked Arryn.

“Most likely. But do not tell him that. A yanee must not know such things beforehand.”

It was only four months to Kiri's Becoming when they learned young King Arne was looking for him, less than a year after coronation. He personally paid them a visit, escorted by a small number of guards and a few of his closest entourage. More guards were left to wait for him in Maelifeld, where he resided the entire length of his stay. The tribe had not seen a royal member since the defunct King Frode was fairly young. The purpose of the visit, His Majesty said, was to greet his *best neighbours*—not *subjects*, no, for their belonging to Astur was not officially stated or agreed upon—and reinforce his ancestors' promise of peace and friendship, now that he had taken his father's place. Though he would not deny he was very curious to meet the Eina himself, claiming he had always been interested in their remarkable race.

Soon it became apparent that their way of life was not the only subject he had taken an interest in. He wanted to hear about their bond with creatures and their beliefs, and how much of it contributed to their healing skills. Speaking of beliefs, there was this very old book about Eina he had discovered in the palace library when he was younger, which alluded to the existence of another world, a *World Of Light*, although without much detail. What was that? A place where their souls resided before and after the death of their bodies? The home of the divine beings his people believed in? He did not really believe in things he could not see, not without solid proof, he confessed, but from an intellectual point of view it was an intriguing idea. After all, the existence of yanee was unthinkable, yet there they were! And the Eina's sense of the living world was absolutely fascinating. Had anyone ever seen the *World of Light*? The book implied, if he remembered correctly, that a few times Eina had been possessed by entities from

that world. Was that true? What had happened to them?

His Majesty asked all that among many other, far more worldly questions, with the perfect attitude of an inquisitive scholar. During his visits he was all politeness and benevolence. But that was just a well played act. The sudden interest in their tribes and the incidental allusions to *The World of Light* and to possession were odd. More important, there was no real emotion behind those perfect manners, as if he had prepared for that meeting long ago, training his self-control. Not even Eina could see very well in the heart of someone who knew how to hide, but that was precisely why they suspected danger behind his professions. Nevertheless they answered him truthfully. For, on one hand, mendacity was against their nature and, on the other, they knew not how much the king actually knew. Omission though, when truth could place them in peril, was acceptable, at least since Astur's attempt to conquer them. So they told him what the lore said, insisting upon the great disaster the whole world would face should anything happen to that *entity* from Edesil. They told him only women have been hosts, or *possessed*, however nothing was said about the Vhareei being born, nor did His Majesty ask about it, for it would have made his intentions obvious.

But at the end of his visit, after expressing his pleasure and gratitude for the hospitality, he promised to return after Kiri—such an adorable, clever child, he could not even tell he was a yanee—would have had his Ritual, because he was very curious to see how that *Second Birth* transformed him.

Everyone suspected that King Arne's visit had been prompted by an incident which had happened about two months before it, in Maelifeld. In an unfortunate train of events Kiri had been close to losing his life. Of those who had witnessed it there were a few who claimed he had been possessed, for what else could explain his eyes bursting on fire and the horror they had inspired? And how else could he have ended up with nothing more than a few bruises? But most had seen nothing of the sort and had dismissed those claims as nonsense, declaring that it was just a case of ridiculous luck. Had the Eina known the Vhareei resurfaces when his host is in danger, they would have been more careful, but that was another detail missing from the lore. It only said he protected the Host, but not how. Unfortunately, despite the fact nobody believed the strange claims,

the incident had somehow reached higher ears in Vres. And now the king had taken an interest and had promised to return after Becoming. Whatever his intentions, the Host was not safe.

There was a council that reunited elders from many tribes and, after debating for over a week, they came to a consensus: *Reei ay tualain* had to disappear.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Whys and wherefores

Silence fell, yet again, around the fire. Kiran's voice had been like an enchanted brush, painting stunning images in their minds. The story, strange and beautiful and sad, had left everyone speechless. And whether they believed any of it or just thought it was the most amazing tale spun by a person's imagination, the fact was it had also soothed the fear and anger in their hearts. They had almost forgotten the pain and the weariness and, despite the very late hour, none of them would have gone to—

"Ho, there!" cried Ceri suddenly, breaking the spell. "You are a woman?!"

The realization hit them like a slap in the face. Had he not just said all Hosts had been women? So, ever since they met, the dinner around the fire and the night at the fort... the lustful soldier, the drinking, the unveiled jokes... he was a *she*?

"No," Kiran replied calmly.

"But you just said—"

"I never became. I had to leave the tribe before my Ritual."

"So you are a man?" insisted Ceri.

Kiran paused, wondering what it was like to be in their place and meet someone like himself. How would he feel about it? Intrigued? Appalled? Sorry? He did not need to reach to their hearts to know how they itched to hear his answer. "Strictly speaking, I'm neither," he said in an even tone. "And both. I'm still a yanee."

To his left Val rested his forehead on his hands, letting out a soft sigh. This was not a comfortable subject.

But Ceri went on, utterly oblivious to that—or, perhaps, too confused to consider the other's feelings—"I don't understand, do you have a...?" He made a gesture with his hand somewhere on the lower body. "Or...?" Bert nudged him before he could finish acting out the question.

"Of my entire crazy story, that's what bothers you?" But then he remembered Ceri had not seen him during the fight, had not felt that power. There was no emotional connection with that part of the story, but the gender issue, that was a detail the man could relate to. "I grew up as a man and, as far as I'm concerned,

I am a man. And I have no physical difficulties.” I’ll leave the rest to your imagination.

Bredan bit his lip and leaned forth to place another piece of wood in the fire. The playful sparkle had returned to his eyes. He was impressed that Kiran was able to stay so composed.

“But you said a yanee is younger than fifteen,” said Bert, quite confused himself. “How old are you, really?”

Indeed, how old, wondered everyone. Kiran was Eina, he could have been older than his father. His father? Was the doctor like them or like him? Her. Kiran.

“I left the tribe just over a decade ago. Being a yanee is not about age, Bert, it’s about being incomplete. The Ritual—which happens to take place at the age of fifteen—is what makes us transcend the yanee stage. It is something so complex, it cannot be explained... My Ritual never took place.” There was a lump in his throat and the last words sounded a little strangled. He cleared his voice.

“I’m sorry,” muttered Bert.

“Five-and-twenty,” Bredan said softly. “Very young.”

“When compared to our lifespan, yes, but it is considered the age of maturity.” The dawn of their physical ripening in fact, but why say that. Some eyebrows rose. “We are a little different,” he brushed them off, hoping they would drop the subject.

The fire was burning with a pleasant warmth. The gracious dance of the flames and the throbbing glow of the embers had a comfortable, nearly hypnotic quality. Everyone seemed to have forgotten their surroundings. But there was not much wood left to burn.

“The Doctor is not really your father, is he?” asked Ceri.

“Of course he is, he raised me since I left home.”

“Why did you come to Laeden?” Bran finally spoke. “Would it not have been safer to seek refuge in your forests?”

He was growing tired. Of remembering, of explaining, of being under their scrutiny like a bug under a magnifying glass. But they still had questions, tired though they were themselves, and he had to face them. “Probably, but...”

“The Vhareei and his Host are more than a tenant and his landlord,” came

Val to his aid. “More than even a fetus and his mother. The Vhareei must build a connection with this world, a bond. To do that he must experience events, emotions, see places, understand our world. Otherwise he will not be able to keep the balance.”

“Things have changed very much since the birth of the Sireei,” said Kiran.

“Sireei?”

“The old king.”

“When was that?” was Bredan curious.

“Over two thousand years ago, it is said.”—Bredan’s mouth puckered in a whistle of surprise—“The Man—your kin, that is—were not even here at the time. The world is different, and keeps changing. Staying in our forests would have led to a weaker bond. I had no choice.”

“So those men were sent by King Arne,” said Bran, bringing their thoughts back to the present. “To take you back to Astur.”—Kiran nodded—“Why does King Arne want you?”

“I don’t know.”

“He wants that thing, obviously,” said Ceri. “The... what’s-its-name.”

“Tsk! To what end, I mean. What does he hope to achieve?”

“I don’t know, Captain,” repeated Kiran, a little sharper this time. “I was just a child when I met him and I left before I could learn his reasons.”

“The Vhareei is not a weapon or a tool,” said Val, “he is a living being. Powerful, indeed, but his power is one of preservation, not destruction. He is still young, though, and until the time comes for him to leave our world, he cannot live outside his host. Whatever King Arne thinks he can do with him—or my son—he is mistaken. He may have read something, but he has not understood this creature’s nature, or that of his bond with the Host.”

“How could he have? Even my people’s knowledge barely scratches the surface. But that has always been enough for them. The Eina have never wished for anything else than the preservation of the natural order.”

“King Arne must think you could lend him power,” said Bredan.

“He is wrong. The Host does not have control over the Vhareei. I cannot command or use him and he is not here to do my bidding. That is not the nature of Kiyun.” Kiran’s fingers were drawing small circles on his temple. He was trying hard to master his emotions, but having his memories and secrets raked

through like that was painful and his father seemed to be the only one aware of it.

Ceri leaned closer to Val. "What is Kiyun?"

"*Kirena ay yun*, the bond of the heart. Kiyun."

"You say his power doesn't destroy, but earlier—" began Bert.

Kiran almost snapped. "Earlier you killed to save your lives."

"What he means," said Val, placing a steadying hand on his son's, "is that the Vhareei protects his host by any means. It is the only way to protect himself."

"I see," said Bran, as if that answered his question. "King Arne can use that power by—"

"No!" Kiran said firmly. "He doesn't know that. His men would not have attacked if he knew." Even so, there was a slight tremble in his voice.

"By what?" asked Bert, but Bredan's glance silenced him. A few moments later his curiosity turned to shock, disgust and a tint of guilt.

"Still," said Bredan after a longer pause, looking into Kiran's eyes, "it would not benefit Arne, after all. What... *he* does is, in essence, an act of self-preservation. It doesn't extend beyond you."

"The king doesn't know that, though."

Of course none of them realized that, instead of running away to save himself as he was supposed to, the Host had *returned* to fight. That the Vhareei had not only saved him, but them as well. Because Kiran had besought him to. *I won't tell you that.*

"Why now?" asked Bran. "A decade has passed and King Arne finds you now, when his forces are moving towards us?"

"Coincidence," answered Val. "Without a doubt he searched for us a long time, but there was an incident a year ago... I think you know what I speak of."

Bran winced and looked at his friend.

"The mugger?" asked Bredan with disbelief.

"Yes. Well, that's how we assume they found out Kiran was hiding in Laeden. A few days ago I learned some men from Astur were asking about my name. That is the real reason behind our journey."

"Why your name?"

"Obviously because Kiri would have changed his. They were searching for a woman, anyway. But I gave my real name, back then. Someone must have

remembered me in Maelifeld, the town close to the Eina village I lived in.” He turned to his son. “I suspect the bookshop keeper, though I’m sure he meant no harm. He was a decent fellow.”

“You lived with Eina?”

“For a whole year, yes. That was a long time ago, before Kiran became a Host.”

Bran’s eyes narrowed. “Come to think of it, there is a book I read when I was young, written by a man who claimed to have lived with Eina. Tonight’s story reminds me of it.”

“You read my book?” asked Val, pleasantly surprised. “Did you enjoy it?”

“So you wrote that! But I’m certain the name was different.”

“A pen name. At the time I just thought it was interesting. Later I realized it saved me a lot of troublesome questions.” *Until now.*

How could I have forgotten about it, wondered Bran. Many details were now flooding his mind. Kiran’s singular physique was true to the book’s description of his people. There were other similarities, albeit that personality of his was not as gentle as Bran had envisioned. And that insolent mouth... Damn it! Had he remembered sooner, it would have explained many things. He met Kiran’s eyes—there was a mixture of surprise and doubt in them. “The child in that book, was he Kiri? You?”

“Yes.”

They felt a few raindrops.

“We should retire,” said Bredan, looking at the sky. “It looks like it will rain.”

They had not noticed the clouds were veiling the moons again. How late was it? Or, rather, how early in the morning?

“Yes,” agreed Bran. “Just one more thing. How did they know where to follow you?”

“That has been bothering me as well,” admitted Val. “They must have recognized us somewhere, but I don’t know where.”

“The inn!” said Bredan. “In Keln, when you spoke to that innkeeper, um, Combs. He was helping some guests with their horses.” Oh, yes, they remembered those. “They paid no attention to us whatsoever, but I thought it strange that one of them reacted when Bran called your name. He even moved

around his horse, looking busy, but he might as well have been listening. We were talking loud enough.”

“Oh! I told Master Combs where we are heading.”

“And he told us what road to take,” added Bredan.

“That must be it.”

“What took them so long to catch up, then?” asked Bert.

“Between an open road to Keln and a forsaken forest, which one would you pick for a surprise attack?” asked Ceri.

“Oh!”

“The real question is how in the world did they manage to get so close to us without our knowledge?” said Bredan. “They were in the bloody tree!”

“I think we made enough noise before dinner to cover their steps,” surmised Val. “And by the time we started the fire, it was already dark.”

“They were skilled men. Trained as spies, most probably,” said Bran.

“What’s more important is that we were careless. There’s no excuse for that.”

Of course you were, because you never really believed me, would have wanted to say Kiran. But that was not the reason, since he had not noticed anything either. The truth was Arne’s men were that skilled at concealing their presence, which was alarming.

It was drizzling. They would have stayed a little longer, the light rain felt good on their dirty faces and posed no threat to the fire, but they only had a piece of wood left.

“Enough for today,” decided Bran. “Let’s get some sleep. We cannot set out too late, unless you want to spend another night in this forest.” He turned to Kiran. “Is there anyone else we should worry about?”

“No, we are alone. You can give up the watch, everyone needs rest.” He was exhausted.

“Um, what about animals?”

“Don’t worry, Bert, there won’t be any animals.” Kiran felt *he* will take care of that.

They put out the flames and levelled the bed, leaving the embers to cool in the rain, and moved the blankets closer to the tree, throwing the new packs near their own. Ceri was hurting, so Val gave him some medicine and helped him lay down. He was familiar with that pain and knew the following days will be

unpleasant for the poor man—poor indeed, for he had also suffered from intoxication just days before. The others refused the medicine.

Only the excitement had kept them awake for so long, because the moment they wrapped themselves in the blankets, they all fell asleep.

The glade was dim and silent as a grave. In the middle stood a solitary oak, like a sentinel, spreading widely its branches warped by old age and the burden of their own weight. Compared to the ancient trees in his home forest, though, this one looked like a sapling. His eyes followed the boughs to the thick trunk and lower, towards the ground. At the roots of the tree a few men were asleep. Travellers. But where were their horses? The air was crisp and smelled of rain.

He stepped closer and the tall, damp grass brushed against his feet, soft and cold. The camp looked ransacked. The face of the nearest man was familiar. His fair hair was tousled and his handsome face was pale.

“Bredan? What are you doing, sleeping in this place?”

But if this was Bredan... He took another step closer—he recognized Bran—and another step—Ceri, Bert. There was something strange about their sleep—the pallor, the way their bodies lay sprawled and tangled in the blankets and—

“Val? What—” Val’s face was smudged and a few trickles of dirt were glistening on his temple. His heart almost stopped. Fates have mercy on him! “No, no, no, Val, wake up! You must wake up!”

He was sleeping, they all were, only it was that other sort of sleep. The everlasting one.

The moment he wanted to rush to Val’s side—“Val! Oh, Fates, please, wake him up!”—he felt he could not move. His whole body was frozen. Not by his own dread, but by something outside of him, a baleful will that was preventing him from reaching the sleeping men. He felt strong, invisible bonds holding him in place and his feet refused to move no matter how much he commanded them. The air was still and the smell of blood and death invaded his nostrils.

“Val,” he cried, “wake up! Don’t go! Don’t leave me alone... Father!” His voice strangled. He turned his eyes to the others. “Bredan, Bert, Ceri! Wake up! Damn you, Captain, wake up!”

They did not stir, but he kept crying their names, ever more desperate and pained.

There is no use in calling them. They are long dead. And soon...

Was that someone's voice or his own despair? Fear left him breathless.

None of this is true. A thought, coming from the depths of his consciousness. It's a dream. Wake up!

He startled awake. The room was dark, but he only felt the faintest pressure, like that of a blanket. No bonds holding him, no will taking possession. The air was stale, but the smell of blood was gone. *Just a nightmare*, he sighed, brushing his damp brow. He could move. A dog barked somewhere. He smiled. *I'm home...*

His body had no weight. He had no body. He was drifting with thousands of drops of light in a strange world. They were like a river, drumming with the beating of thousands of hearts. *This is not home*. Yet there was a familiar feeling about it, about this gentle flow, this steady beating, this warmth. In the distance something was shining bright and the current was moving towards it. Not just this one, there were others, coming from both sides, drumming with life, flowing towards that light. He felt as if he were in two places at once: inside the river and above it, for he could see there were many such rivers, all flowing towards the same place. And from that place he felt a strong heartbeat, rippling back through the rivers. A great power, holding everything together. *What is that*, he wanted to ask, but he had no mouth. Only thoughts.

Sireei, came the answer. It was a thought, not a voice, but it was not his.

Who are you?

You know who.

Where am I?

You know where.

Oh, he understood. This was that dream. *Is this Edesil?*

An image of it. One of many. Yours.

Mine? I see what you show me.

You see what you can understand.

But I don't.

You will, in time.

He was drifting with the drops of light in that peaceful world. Yet he felt a lingering pain, weak, like the lingering coolness left on his skin by a stray drop of rain on a sunny day. And fading still. Where did that come from?

Why are you showing me this?

I am not. You see because you want to know.

It made no sense. You never spoke to me before.

Because you wanted me not to. You told me to leave you alone.

When did I say that?

When we first met. You wanted me to go away. You were afraid.

He was? He could not remember, perhaps because he was dreaming. Ah, so comforting... *If this is a dream, where is my body?*

Sleeping. With your kin. The creature with many limbs is shading you.

The creature with many limbs? What kind of creature is that? *I don't understand.*

What don't you?

What creature is that?

Larger than your kin. Older, but still young. With many limbs and fingers.

They are all around you, many, many of them. This one is alone.

Oh, that kind of creature. A growing thing. A tree?

Yes, a tree.

A solitary tree and many, many others... a forest. He remembered. The glade, the oak, Val... dead. Now he knew where that lingering pain came from. It flared inside him. He had never woken up in his room. Because he was not there.

Not dead. That is just your fear. They are safe. We saved them.

They did. They had fought together, he remembered that too. What had happened? The memories were not clear. Only fragments, scattered like the shards of many broken mirrors, each of a different dream. So scattered and jumbled he could not tell which was imagination—his fear—and which was real. How could he remember reality inside a dream? But he said they were safe. And he remembered both of them fighting. He wanted to believe that was real.

Thank you for saving Val.

Your feelings saved him. I only helped a little.

The view changed, as though he were high and far above the world. The rivers of light were like blood vessels, gathering around a giant heart, but he was drifting away from them—*Don't go*, cried his mind—farther and farther away, until he found himself alone, in darkness. *Talk to me, please... Will he talk to me again?*

Sleep, came a distant answer. *We shall speak again. We shall...*

It was well into the morning when they finally set off, but the day was just as sullen as the ones before, matching their own mood.

After too few hours of sleep they had woken up sore, stiff and cold. They were all feeling bad, some more than others, and Ceri felt the worst—the mere act of breathing was painful. Kiran was quiet and aloof, as he used to be in the first days. On top of everything, the rain kept falling, not heavy and drenching, but gentle and incessant, the sort of rain which slowly works its way into the heart and fills it with sadness. That and the cold morning air had made short work of the warmth their blankets had provided during the night, sending unpleasant shivers through their tired, beaten bodies. Breakfast had been more of a necessity, a duty to those bodies, than a want, for none had the slightest appetite. Especially after Bran had reminded them they had to get rid of the corpses before leaving. Ironically, the most unpleasant task had proven the most beneficial. The dead were lying in the tall grass, soaked, but untouched, as they had left them. No animals had visited the glade during the night. Kiran's suggestion had been to carry them into the forest, north of the road, where people had no reason to wander off. The forest, he said, would take care of the rest, leaving no trace of their passing. Since they had no time, nor any means to otherwise dispose of the bodies, they had done so without arguing. The effort had warmed them up better than anything else. *That* was the benefit. Only Ceri and Val had stayed behind.

They left the glade in silence. With five spare horses, they had loaded all the packs on them, taking some weight off their mounts. The animals were following them submissively—as one would expect from trained horses, only these were not theirs; that docile behaviour was Kiran's doing—each one roped to one of their own, save for Ceri's. The arrangement resulted in a rather slow pace, which was concerning at first, but after a while the steadiness of that rhythm raised their hopes. Two days to the next village, the farmer had said, so there was still a chance to reach the other side before nightfall. Provided the man was right.

Beyond the glade the forest looked just the same, a mirror image of what they had seen the day before. Not literally, but the trees were just as old, the air just as

still and the place just as quiet. The light reaching them through the thick clouds and the intertwined branches—dripping heavily—was dull. The marvellous foliage, a delight for the eyes with its brilliant colours, had lost all charm: nothing more than the outward varnish of what had started to feel like a prison. And yet... something was different. The forest looked less eerie, the silence was not as heavy, the echoes not as unnerving. But in truth, it was not the forest which was different, it was them. Their feelings. Compared to what they had witnessed during the night, nothing seemed too strange or dangerous. And perhaps somewhere in the back of their minds, unbeknownst to them, there was the comfort that should anything happen, they had the most unbelievable creature on their side.

"I'm a little surprised that the smell of blood did not attract any visitors while we were asleep," started Bran. He had called Kiran to ride with him, because he still had questions. "I was expecting, at least, to find some of the bodies missing. Are there really no wild animals, or was it because of you?"

"Because of *him*." There was no reason to avoid the truth now. "Though it's true that I have not sensed any large animals yesterday. But there must be, you saw the trails in the grass."

Kiran was not in the mood for more questioning, but he had no illusion that the captain's curiosity was satisfied or that he had any wish to spare his feelings. However, he had hoped lack of sleep would put Bran in a disposition similar to his. Clearly it was not the case. At least the overture was promising a civil conversation.

"It's a sad way to go, even for an enemy," said Bran. "Being devoured by animals. It lacks dignity." The remark had a flavour of regret.

"I do not believe feeding other creatures is devoid of dignity," replied Kiran, after a moment of surprise at the unexpected direction of their talk. "Would you think the same about something you hunted?"

"That is different. If I found a dead animal, I would not eat it."

"Because it could make you sick. So what would you do?"

"Bury it, probably."

"To decay in the ground and become food for smaller creatures."—Bran made a slight grimace—"We take and we give back. There is no disgrace in

that... However, animals is not what I had in mind when I suggested to take them in the forest.”

“What, then?”

Was that relief in Bran's voice? “How much of Val's book do you remember?”

“Some of it. Not that clearly, but I remember a good deal about your kin, now that I think of it. It left a strong impression on me at the time.”

“Do you recall the feya? The creatures crossing from the other world?”

“I'm not convinced I understood that part.”

Nicely put. “There is a Blessed Ground in this forest, a place where our world and Edesil, their world, touch. It is where feya cross to this side. The forest is full of them.” Kiran glanced at Bran to see his reaction. He was oddly calm and, whether he believed any of it or not, his interest was genuine. *No sarcasm? How unexpected!* “Feya feed on many things. Some feed on corpses.”

That sounded grim.

“Like wolves?” Bran had not seen wolves, but had read they do not shy away from a dead body.

“No, the way feya feed is different from that of other creatures... In this case insects or maggots would be a closer comparison, I think.” That was equally unpleasant, Kiran realized. “What's important is they leave nothing behind.”

“Have you seen that?”

“No... But that is how our elders leave this world, I was told.”

“Oh!”

In Laeden the dead were buried during a ceremony where family and friends said their goodbyes, unless they died of a sickness that could spread, in which case they were burned prior to burial. Was it so different, though? The dead decaying in the ground instead of on top? In the end they all disappeared, feeding the living things and leaving only the memory of their life behind. There was something sad about that thought, perhaps because they were going to war, so Bran's mind pushed it aside and went back to the book, trying to remember more of it. If Fates were merciful and helped them return home, he would read it again.

“Is that why this place is so strange? Because there is a Blessed Ground?”

“It is not strange, just old... I suppose that's why Man find it unnerving.”

Blessed Grounds are quiet, in many senses. But they are safe.”

Perhaps for your kin, thought Bran. He did not feel safe at all, not if he and his men were to venture away from the road. Certainly not at night. “You said you did not sense those men because they had something with them.” His thoughts were in disarray, but for once he felt no wish to organize them.

“Odari. Feya which feed on emotions.”

That was far stranger than feeding on corpses. Bran could not think of anything similar. How, he wanted to know. Instead he asked, “Which emotions?”

“All of them, starting with the strongest. Eina sometimes use odari in their healing, but they know how.”

“Meaning?”

“If you keep them close to the heart for too long, like those men did, you risk being left with no emotions. No fear, no anger, no joy, nothing. In their case, it was what they wanted, so I would not sense them.”

That explained why their attackers were so impassible. “But they still feared you... *him*.”

“I don’t know how to explain that.”

That made Bran realize something else. “Is it true, then, that we can see these creatures?”

“You already did, you just don’t know it.” Bran’s eyes darted towards the trees, though he had no idea what to look for. Kiran pointed to the forest floor. “The clusters of mushrooms on rotten wood, some of them are feya. Others are nested in the hollows of the older trees. Granted, it’s not easy to tell them apart, feya and the things they mimic. But not impossible either.”

“How do you tell which is what?”

“The mimicry is good, but not perfect. You learn the difference.”

“That means you cannot see it, unless you are close enough.” There seemed to be a question in that.

“I’m the Host. I see their glow.”

When Bran had called him to talk, Kiran had braced himself for another interrogation, but this was the closest to a normal conversation between two people they had ever had. This time the *stubborn stick* was not suspicious or hostile, just curious. And it was very surprising to discover that Bran had any

interest in such unworldly subjects, for he had always seemed a pragmatic man. *He did read Val's book, though.* Not just that, but there was no doubt in his mind, now, that Bran had seen something that evening, when they first met. Something that had led him to believe Kiran was dangerous, inducing a strong hostility. *I feel he still doesn't like me.*

He looked over his shoulder at their companions, who were following in pairs, talking among themselves. Their seat was slack and their shoulders sagged as if they were heavier that morning. Their faces were serious and drawn, dark shadows hanging under dull eyes. Their voices were lower than the day before, too low for him to understand the words, but there was no anxious alertness in their attitude. They were tired and sore, yes, but not afraid. Even so, he reached to their hearts, just a little, for his own peace of mind. Ceri's physical distress had made him morose again, but at least the forest was not weighing on his mind anymore. Kiran needed no words to understand that Bert was giving him an account of everything he had missed the previous evening, or to guess the subject of Bredan's conversation with Val. He sighed, turning his eyes back to the road in front of them. How did it come to that? Why had the Fates, after guarding his secret for so long, suddenly forced him to reveal it? Was there a reason or was he simply running out of luck? There could not have been a worse time for it. What was he supposed to do from then on?

"Is there something wrong?" Bran's tone was concerned.

Hm? Oh, he is just worried about another attack. "No, no. Everything is fine."

"...What is he doing now? The... king."

"Vhareei," reminded him Kiran. "He is asleep. Dormant."

"How can you tell?"

"I don't sense him." He met the captain's questioning eyes and shrugged. "It's as if he doesn't exist."

Bran's forehead crinkled. "Is he always so?"

"Yes. Unless something rouses him."

"Such as you being in danger."

"That always does."

"So that evening, in Ardaena..."

"He was protecting me." From the corner of his eye Kiran saw Bran's chest

falling, long and slowly. *That's what always bothered you, isn't it?*

"If not for last night, would you have told us who you are? *What you are?*" Bran knew the answer, it was too obvious, but he was still curious whether the other would lie or not.

"No," answered Kiran without hesitation, looking straight into his eyes. "I would never have told you. Nor anyone else. But the person you knew until yesterday, that was *me*. Who I am. Not the Host, but the man who shared with you the journey, the food, the drink. Me now, after living for eleven years in Laeden." He could not help himself, because he still felt more bitter over their past than he should have had. "The one you seem to find so irksome."

Bran flinched. Was that supposed to make him feel bad or spite him? "Nobody is perfect," he said dismissively. The revelation of Kiran's secret may have lifted a weight from his mind, but apparently he was still an annoying brat.

"Well, at least you admit it," said Kiran with a smirk. He knew the comment had been, in fact, about him.

"Pfft!"

That morning they rode almost without break. It was not just the presence of the new horses which forced them into a slower pace, Ceri could not even sit a slow trot, because the bouncing made it too painful. Not that the road offered too many occasions to speed up, the way it followed the slopes and curves of the land, but a little variation would have been welcome. Nonetheless they made steady progress and the animals had no trouble sustaining that rhythm. None of the new ones showed any signs of fear or any inclination to disobey, and their own did not seem bothered by the addition. Grass was scarce, if any, but there were puddles here and there and they stopped once to let them sip. As for themselves, the provisions in the new packs had given them a little comfort. Now their concern was with the weather. The light rain and constant dripping from trees was soaking their cloaks again, sticking them to their bodies, cold and heavy. And there was nothing to be done about that.

It was probably early afternoon—though who could have said—when their ears caught a faint sound of water, burbling on its way to the plains below, before they saw the stream running at the bottom of the little valley the road had led them into. Where the two met, the stream was wider and shallow, easy to

cross without a bridge, but further down it narrowed and deepened and its waters were faster, fed by days of raining. On the other side they took a proper break, for man and horse to quench their thirst and rest. They refilled the water skins, so now there was one less problem to worry about. The crowns of the old trees shaded the stream banks, but the light was stronger and the banks were covered with moss, ferns and various moisture loving weeds. As soon as they finished drinking, the horses moved on to chew on them.

"Don't let them eat the ferns," warned Val. "They are not good for horses."

"What about moss?" asked Bert.

"...Just don't let them eat too much."

"We're not staying that long," said Bran.

"Do you suppose this could be one of the streams that broke the bridges on the main road?" asked him Bredan.

"Possibly. The one near Appleby, if I had to take a guess."

"It doesn't look that strong. Perhaps the others found a way to cross it."

Bran did not answer that.

A few feet away from the crossing Val found a patch of weeds with broad leaves and bristly burrs. Kiran pulled out a knife and started digging out a young plant.

"What are you doing?" asked Bran, following them.

"This is helpful with pain and swelling," explained Val. "Not as effective as my powders, but I did not prepare for broken bones."

"I thought this was just a weed."

"Mm, yes, many think so. But burdock is a wonderful plant."

They washed the thick roots and a handful of the larger leaves and tied them to one of their packs.

"We're done," he announced.

There was no use in lingering there, everything was wet and slippery, they could not dry themselves and they were not even hungry. All they wanted was to reach the end of that interminable woodland, which was beginning to wear upon them.

Val turned his attention to the wounded. "How are you two holding up?"

"My arm is not that bad," said Bert, "but I'm not sure about him." He looked at his comrade.

Ceri inhaled deeply and grimaced, letting out the air loudly. "I won't die," he cut him short, when the other opened his mouth.

Val frowned. "I'd rather give you something for the pain. Shallow breathing may feel more comfortable, but it will affect your lungs."

Riding was not advisable either, but what choice did they have?

Ceri thought for a moment, glancing at his captain. "I can bear it. Keep those for the night, please."

"Fine, but let me know if it gets any worse."

They helped him get on his horse.

Just as on the previous day, the forest gradually changed. Younger trees were more numerous and more plants grew on the forest floor, but it was not until the fiery leaves of maples caught their eye that they became aware of those changes.

"Woo-hoo!" cried Bert. "This is it, the end of the nightmare!" He turned to Kiran, glowing. "It is, isn't it? We're getting close to the edge?"

"It appears so."

"Thank goodness!... But you like this place," he remembered, trying to moderate his enthusiasm. "I'm sorry, it's not that bad, just..."

"The air was growing a little too heavy," agreed Kiran.

"We're not out, yet," came Bran's loud voice from the front. "Save that energy for later."

"Shouldn't we take a look at the map?" asked him Bredan. "See where that village is on the other side?"

"When we reach the edge. Until then it's useless. We have no idea where we are." But his heart, too, was beating a little faster.

As if to prove him right, the road kept winding in the shade of the trees, as if the forest were refusing to let go of it. They rode for another hour or so before they noticed the first hints of people passing. And then some, before they saw light among the trees, but finally the world opened before their eyes. The light was so much brighter and the horizon so much farther, they were left without breath. To the north stretched the vast forest, but to the east and below the forest, to the south, the grassy land undulated as though giant fingers had pinched the surface and then let it set in gentle, rounded folds, tufted with trees, now fading in the mist of rain. And they had to stop and take in all that landscape, and then

dismount to touch the grass, fearing it might be just an illusion. After two days spent in the dark, oppressive bowels of the forest, they were feeling like prisoners who had just escaped from the dungeons of an giant fortress: free, excited, overwhelmed and almost disbelieving.

However, they were sitting in the rain and, now their eyes had adjusted to the light, they realized the sun was probably setting. There were settlements down there, to their far right, barely discernible, but the road was not leading to them. Instead it continued gently uphill and turned slightly to the north, disappearing beyond the top of the hill.

“Map?” asked Bredan.

“At the top, if there is nothing in sight.”

But there was no need for map there, because as soon as they rounded the top, they saw the small village tucked in the folds of the land, little columns of smoke rising from the chimneys.

The place in which they would spend that night was smaller than the first one, but it was separated from the byre and only used to store dried fodder. In an open shed just outside their own, filled with that year's harvest of hay, the farmer and his children had made room for the horses, so they would not spend the night in the rain. The children had brought them buckets of water and food was aplenty. As for them, all they wanted was something to warm them up—tea, had suggested Val. With it their host also brought them cheese, salted meat and bread. Of course they paid for all that, in fact more than on the first night, because the farmer had required a bit of convincing to take them in. Not because he felt no sympathy for their situation—every villager who had seen them coming in that weather, drenched and tired, felt sorry for them—but because they were coming from the forest, possibly injured judging by their moves, carrying swords—blasted things, they were difficult to conceal—and five spare horses. That had made him and everyone else circumspect. They could have been highwaymen. Only when, after offering money and making up a story, Bran had finally showed him the royal sigil on the missive from Prince Feolan—under the farmer's solemn promise of discretion—had the man accepted to help them.

Kiran crushed the burdock leaves and lined them on a piece of cloth. He wiped Ceri's skin with another cloth soaked in warm water, patient and careful not to hurt him. Ceri's eyes were following his every move. He was breathing with difficulty and his right side was badly bruised and tender. Despite Val's morning dose of medicine, riding had been an ordeal and he was both physically and mentally exhausted. But the touch of those hands was very soft and had a comforting quality to it. It was different than when the doctor had done the same thing. And strange, for now the talk about Kiran's gender was coming back to him and, despite still regarding him as a man, he could not help wondering about it. That fine face, so close to him, even in that poor light, it was too smooth. It made him more self-conscious. He had not paid much attention before, but in the light of the recent events...

Kiran placed the leaves on the bruised skin—"Hold here, please," he told Ceri—and began to wrap him in strips of fabric, which Val had made from a piece of old sheet their host had given them. Not tight, for that would have done more damage than good, just enough to keep those leaves in place without hindering the man's breathing. And while he did so, his lips began to move, and Ceri first thought he was telling him something. But the words made no sense to him.

"Anaana sidaar mae edesti fallas, mae fenna leannas, mae kirena tualas," murmured Kiran, while his hands were working. *"Anaana sidaar..."*

It sounded almost like a song, that strange, melodious language, mesmerizing like a... chant? An unusual warmth was spreading through his chest from wherever Kiran's hands touched him. "What are you doing?" asked Ceri, stopping him.

"Trying to help you reach Fiodhin before the war is over."

"You were saying something strange just now. What was it?"

"Ah, *that*," said Kiran, looking away. "I'm casting a spell on you. Tomorrow you will feel as good as new. But, um, your teeth and hair might fall." He met the man's uncertain gaze. "Quick healing comes with a price."

Ceri recoiled and the sudden move made him groan.

"Pfff! I'm joking. Sit still and let me finish."

"It's an old Eina chant," said Val, who had seen the scene from the entrance. He thought for a moment. "Bright sidaar flow into this world, heal this

creature... find home in this heart... something like that.”—His son confirmed with a slight nod—“I never heard you using it, before.”

“It just came to mind,” replied Kiran. “I had forgotten it.”

“So, not a spell?”

“There is no such thing,” said Val, placing near Ceri a mug of steaming tea. “When he’s done, drink this.”

Ceri grimaced. “More tea?”

“Made from the roots.”

“Ugh! How can you drink so much of this thing?”

“You are beginning to sound like Rhun. *This thing* has more benefits than ale. How long do you think you can ride in your condition? The next days will be very unpleasant, I speak from personal experience. There is little I can do until we reach Fiodhin, but this tea can help. Just so you know, you shall drink it every day.”

Ceri’s shoulders drooped. He, too, knew he will not be able to endure that pain for another day. “You two are so odd, it’s annoying,” he grumbled. If not for them he would not be in that situation, although he was aware the attack was not their fault. But just as he was thinking about his and his comrades’ misfortune of being stuck with them for the rest of the journey, he noticed his breathing was not so painful anymore. In fact the awful sensation was diminishing, just as Kiran was tying the last knots to his dressing. He inhaled deeper, than exhaled, but no stab of pain cut his breath short. It was still there, but so greatly reduced he could easily breathe through it. “It’s almost gone, the pain.” How could that be? “What did you do?” he demanded, grabbing Kiran’s wrist. His thoughts scrambled. How could a man have bones so thin?

“For goodness’ sake!” snapped Kiran, pulling his hand free. “I didn’t do anything.”

Don't be stupid, thought Ceri, vexed by his own odd reactions, *how can a woman be so flat?*

Val stepped between them. “Eina are the best healers.” He handed Ceri his shirt, “Better dress before you get cold,” then took Kiran’s hands in his own. They were very warm. “It must be *him*. Hosts have powerful hands, your grandfather said. Your bond is strengthening. You should be grateful,” he turned to Ceri, who was fumbling with his shirt. “I could not have done so much.”

"You're noisy." Bran came in, followed by Bert and Bredan. "What is going on?"

"Nothing," replied Val. "Just a small exchange of opinions."

"How are you feeling, Ceri?"

"Better than I had all day," he admitted, though reluctantly. He was a little concerned about whatever Kiran had done to him—not to mention those absurd thoughts—but the fact was he *was* feeling much better and that deserved some gratitude. "Thank you, Kiran... Can you do the same for Bert?"

"Do what?" asked Bert.

"Take care of your arm. He did a damn good work with my ribs."

They kept watch one by one, otherwise none would have had enough sleep. Val thought it was unnecessary, but Bran was concerned about the village people. He had the nagging feeling that even their host had agreed to their stay, at least in part, out of fear. He did not want to take any more risks.

Kiran took the first watch. He went to sit with the horses for a while—he found them more by sensing their emotions and from memory, than by sight, it was that dark outside—then returned to the barn guided by the feeble light of the oil lamp burning on a shelf, given to them by the farmer. It illuminated the place just enough so they would not trip on each other when they woke up for their turns. He sat cross legged in the open door, perched on a bale of hay, watching the water drip from the eave. He could see very little beyond that, only the soft mud at the entrance, trampled by their feet, and the splashes of raindrops in the puddles in their footprints. But that only made him more aware of his other senses. The rain was so calm he almost could not hear it beyond the snores of his sleeping companions. The horses were quiet. From time to time he heard movement next door, where cattle rested, ruminating or napping. The smell coming from there was strong—he had noticed the others wrinkling their noses a few times—but it sent his thoughts back home. Was it raining in Ulmaby? What were their friends doing? He missed them already: Drest's grumpiness, Ansa's motherly attitude, Alden's strange humour, Belesni's teasing, Noll's naivety... Rhun's unpolished manners, Glen's—wait, why were the latter coming to his mind? When had he started to think about these soldiers so fondly?

The crisp air was sending shivers through his body and his feet were cold.

The boots were caked with mud and he had taken them off. He yearned for a bath. It was the third day without washing and the thought alone made him cringe with disgust. The temptation to undress and go out in the rain—let it pour on him, cleanse him, chase the fatigue from his limbs, his mind, his heart—was too great, but if someone woke up and saw him... Thank goodness for that weather! Had it been as warm as when they left Ulmaby, he felt he would have rotted. How could these men stand themselves after sweating for so many days? Then he remembered Ceri did not smell as strong as he had expected. His thoughts drifted to those awful bruises, the laboured breath, Bert's injured arm... because of him.

“Thank you,” he whispered, staring blankly outside. “For easing their pain.”

It came from your heart. I only helped a little.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

No longer strangers, not quite friends

The street in front of The Silver Oak had grown quiet. The shops had closed and people had either retired to their homes or had filled the taverns and alehouses, but even those were less noisy than usual. Ever since the army camp outside the city gates had grown, the place had lost its usual liveliness. It had a heavy aura, as if something unpleasant were expected to happen at any moment. The evenings were dull.

From the open window of their room, Kiran watched the hurried step of the passers by, their hunched shoulders, their tired looks, whenever they raised their eyes. The closer to Fiodhin they rode, they had noticed in the previous days, the more serious the faces of people were. The city was different from what he remembered. Last time they had visited it was noisy and effervescent, much like Ardaena. Now it was almost spiritless. During the past days the weather had improved, but in the wake of those rains the temperature remained low. A cool breeze was blowing over the city and Kiran hugged himself, closing his eyes.

The Silver Oak was a modest inn, but clean and fairly affordable. One of Val's old friends, the same person they had helped on their last visit, and whom they had gone straight to after parting ways with Bran and his men the day before, had recommended it. He would have given them his guest room, had he had a place to accommodate their horses, but since he had not, he had spoken with the innkeeper—some relative of his—on their behalf, and the man had rented them a small room in the attic, built for family guests. It was really small, but they were not sharing, and it solved the lodging problem for a while. Nevertheless it was a temporary arrangement, until they would decide whether to stay in Fiodhin for the winter—in which case they should rent something by the month—or go somewhere else, and if so, where. Either required money.

They were not short of coin, in fact they had more than when they left home. Before reaching the city Bran had insisted that they had the right to claim a share in the booty, asking them to choose two of the five spare horses and splitting whatever was left of the money and goods acquired from Arne's men. They had sold those horses that morning for a pretty sum. Now they had enough to pass the winter, but since the future was nebulous, the bulk of it was put aside for

contingencies. And since renting and living expenses had a nasty habit of digging holes in one's purse, they had to think of ways to fill it. Fortunately that same friend had proposed them to help him in his shop—and what else could a man Val knew be other than an apothecary? *A bookshop keeper*, Kiran had laughed to himself—and they were considering accepting. They also intended to take a few trips to the neighbouring woods and gather some roots and other ingredients which were in season. Both would replenish their coin.

The old boards on the floor were creaking under their steps and the roof was low, sloping outwards. At that end the only place where they could stand without hitting their heads on the rafters was the gabled dormer, opposite the entrance. There were two beds on either side of the door and very little space to move about, but the room was clean and snug. On a stool by one of the beds was an oil lamp with three spouts. All wickers were lit. Another one was burning on the window sill, its flames flickering in the current coming through the open sash. The oil inside had a faint minty scent, which made the smell of the burning lamps less heavy. *It pays to be friends with a chemist*, thought Kiran, closing the window. Val was lying in bed, reading. The apothecary had lent him a couple of books, because he remembered Val's obsession with reading and he trusted him to return them. Seeing that contented expression on his father's face made him smile and, for a while, he stood there, watching him.

"Is something the matter?" asked Val, without raising his eyes from the book.

"You seem pleased. It makes me feel at ease."

"Because otherwise you would feel...?"

Kiran took off the boots and sat on the other bed, crossing the legs and leaning his back against the wall. "Restless?"

Val lowered the book. "Any particular reason for that? Apart from the army outside the city gates."

"...Various, I suppose."

Now Val closed the book entirely, turning his full attention to his son. As he sat there, cross legged and with his hands folded, quietly resting in his lap—in the fashion of Eina, when they gathered in the main room, and with the same effortless grace—he looked so similar to Arryn that Val could not help feeling a little nostalgic. Kiran had undone his hair and it was falling in loose waves on

his chest, about a hand below the collarbone, emphasising the ambiguous quality of a yanee's appearance. The orange light of the oil lamps was bringing out the reddish tones in it. Only his air was different: Arryn's was always peaceful and gentle—indeed all Eina seemed at peace with the goods and bads of life—but lately his was often troubled.

"I always took pleasure in our journeys, but this one makes me uneasy," said Kiran, prompted by his father's attention.

"Because it was a necessity, rather than a choice. Well, in a sense they all were, since we must earn a living."

"Only this time we don't know when, or even *if* we will be able to go back. And we just started."

"*When*. I would rather think of it as a matter of *when*. But I understand your fear. This might be the most dangerous of our trips."

"It's not fear for my life, Val. I just feel displaced again. I fear for you and I fear ending up without a family and a home."

Val understood perfectly. Kiran had been forced to leave his home and loved ones as a child and, worst of all, they had no idea what had happened with his tribe afterwards. There was no way to contact them without exposing themselves. Now he had been forced to leave his second home and his friends. He did not know what to say to encourage him, because he himself had no answer.

"I can only promise you to do the best within my abilities to protect you. For as long as I breathe I will not leave your side, you know that. But think about it, the Vhareei helped you save my life back there, in the glade. You said he did so because he felt your survival, your wish to stay alive, depends much on mine. That means he will protect both of us, as long as we do our best to protect him. It makes me feel quite confident in our chances."

Kiran smiled, though there was more sadness in it than Val's arguments deserved. But he knew those words were not empty. That confidence was coming from the heart.

"You are right, I don't know why I suddenly felt so dispirited. King Arne doesn't know where we are and Fiodhin is heavily guarded. We are safe, the three of us."

"Precisely. It goes without saying that we must be cautious, but fear weakens

both mind and heart. That we should absolutely avoid.”—Kiran gave a silent nod —“What other reason?”

“Hmm... I think that sums up all of them.”

“The fear of being alone.”

“The fear of losing all which I hold dear.”

Val scratched his cheek, thoughtful. “Could it be you miss our recent companions?”

Kiran's heart fluttered. He would not have admitted that had his father not said it. He lowered his head and the heavy tresses fell over his face, obscuring it. He had always thought additional company on the road was more a nuisance than an enjoyment, but those men had accepted them with all their eccentricities and secrets. They had grown to trust each other. It was a pleasant feeling. He raised his head, running a hand through the hair. A smile seemed to hang at the corners of his eyes, though it had not reached the lips yet. Perhaps because it was guilty and he was trying to hold it back.

“Would you criticize me if that were true?”

“No, that is your talent. But I would wonder what you have done with my stubborn son.”

Kiran's expression softened and the smile finally bloomed. “They are good men. Bredan always says so... I hope Ceri will get well.”

“He will, and sooner than one would normally do. I suspect the pain relief was just one of the consequences of Vhareei's power. The king is growing stronger.”

“You think he will heal faster?”

“I certainly hope so. Besides, he can finally take a break and rest.”

“And they have good doctors.”

“They do... In any case, I told Bran where to ask about us, should they need our assistance with his friend. I have a feeling we will meet again.” He opened the book, paused, then leaned over the edge of the bed and handed his son the other book. “It will keep your mind busy.” He shrugged. “Or put you to sleep.”

It was a chemistry book, a subject that interested both of them, but by no means a bedtime read. *I won't have much trouble falling asleep*, thought Kiran, bringing the lamp from the window sill and placing it on the floor, near his bed. Then he snuggled under the blanket and opened the book.

“Val? Have I ever told you how happy I am Danaa found you that day?”
Val smiled, without interrupting from his reading. “Have I?”

* * *

The day after coming out of Daweldwig—that was the name of the forest, the farmer, who had been chattier in the morning, had told them—was the most pleasant since they left Keln. They were better rested, despite keeping watch, almost dry and, best of all, they had learned from their host they were three days away from Fiodhin. It would not feel as if they rode blindly anymore. In that landscape, especially through the forest, their map had been useless, but the farmer had given them good directions to reach Rufburn, a village on the Eastern Road, only a day away from Fiodhin. Master Combs from Keln had been right, they had taken a shortcut, albeit not the most pleasant one.

Before breakfast Kiran had undone Ceri's dressing, discarding the withered leaves, and had wiped his skin again with warm water. The swelling was receding and the soreness was far less severe. The mere touch of his hands was softening it. Ceri had managed to sleep more than he had hoped, despite waking up a few times because he wanted to turn and could not, but his comrades had helped him. Val had made him drink another mug of tea, but he had refused the pain powders, feeling confident in his strength to put up with another day after Kiran's exceptional work. “Hold those for later, please,” he had told the doctor. Bert's arm, too, was less sore. After the previous evening, Val had let the nursing in his son's hands. All in all, everyone was feeling better and hopeful. The farmer had given them warm milk and cheese pies for breakfast, and fresh bread and smoked cheese for the road, feeling they had paid him too much for his help.

They did not ride much faster, because the road was muddy, however they were in the open and the weather was slowly improving. It was still cold, but the clouds were thinning and the rain had turned into sporadic showers. The road followed the gentle curves of the land through pastures and villages scattered in the valleys, crossing streams and meeting other roads. They saw cattle and sheep

grazing and even met people working in their small fields of corn, at the edges of their villages. Around noon they saw the sun for the first time in four days, although the sky remained mostly cloudy. But even a glimpse of it had been enough to cheer them up.

There was no more tension between them, now that they had revealed their secrets, no more side-looks and awkward pauses, no more hostile questions and evasive answers. To say they were *friends* would have been an overstatement, but they were not mere acquaintances either, and certainly not strangers. Bran was still serious, because that was his manner, but Kiran noticed he was not watching him with suspicion anymore, instead acting in the same way he had seen him among his men in the first days. Though he kept being sarcastic every once in a while, which had nothing to do with the Host. Bredan's easy demeanour had lost that equivocal edge. Bert was Bert, he had always been amiable, and Ceri had reverted to his dispassionate self, but even he was more chatty than he used to. After standing naked before them, in a manner of speaking—for that is what it had felt like to expose his descent and his secret—Kiran had lowered his guard, tired to worry about the meaning of every word or look. He had nothing to hide anymore, except, of course, his yanee body, but that truly was nobody's business. Even in Val's manner they sensed a very subtle change, a warming up. There was a growing sense of trust and fellowship between them and, as a result, everyone had loosened.

That day they lunched. They sat on the green banks of a stream, gorging on the bread and cheese the farmer had given them—and, boy, did that cheese taste sweeter than any they had eaten back home!—and even from their own provisions, as if they had rediscovered the pleasure of eating. They took their time, enjoying the food, the chirping of birds, the jingle of cowbells, the wonderful smell of wet pasture. The horses were too busy to wander off, for they had fresh grass all around them and made the best out of that break. Before leaving Ceri swallowed some medicine. It felt too good to ride in that peaceful landscape and breathe that air. The pain would have spoiled it.

The road led steadily north-east, according to the map. Shortly after sunset they reached the village in which they planned to spend the night. They looked less haggard than the previous evening, albeit the stubble was turning into a beard—which made Kiran's smooth cheek stand out even more—and the

shadows beneath the eyes had not faded. But that calmer state of mind had lent them a friendlier air and the people met them with less reserve. They were offered a place to sleep inside one of the houses, even though it only meant a pillow and a blanket on the floor, however they preferred the hay in the barn, claiming they do not wish to intrude too much. The truth was they wanted their privacy. Nevertheless they agreed to sup with their host, for the family was chatty and very curious to hear stories of their travels. Bran was not keen on telling the truth about them, but Val had an engaging manner and plenty of interesting tales. Kiran's participation was more substantial than before, adding a delightful enthusiasm to his father's stories, which quickly won over the farmer's children—*Why am I surprised that the brat appeals to children?* thought Bran. With their tales, humorous remarks from Bredan and plenty of questions from everyone else, they spent a pleasant evening and left a very good impression on their host. At night Kiran nursed them again, using herbs which Val had picked during breaks.

The following day was very similar. After that mirthful dinner and a resting sleep, they were in a very good mood. The weather kept changing for the better—not as much warming as clearing up—and, because the sun was drying the land, the horses' step was smoother. Pastures were making way to orchards and rolling fields of rye and corn, villages were larger, people and carts were more often on the road. But even so the places felt different from those along the main roads, what with their slow rhythm and uncommon calm. Just as the heavy silence of Daweldwig had made them feel far away from the rest of the world and its worries, so did the peacefulness of those hills—six travellers, riding across the country in the comfortable company of each other.

"I wanted to say this before, Val," said Bredan, when they took a lunch break, "you have a great way with people. I rarely came across men like you."

"Thank you," replied Val without affectation. "Coming from you, it is a great compliment."

"Why so?"

"There is no need to pretend. I may not know your story, but I can tell your talent is... persuasion. You read people like books."

"Ha, ha, ha! Such an elegant way to put it. I am flattered." Bredan was

genuinely amused. "This talent runs in my family. It's a convenient gift."

"As long as you don't abuse it," said Bran.

Who, me? his friend rose his brows, while biting on the softened crust of a pie. The others snickered.

"In any case," said Val, "when you meet so many people, you inevitably learn."

"You also learn how to flourish your tales," added Ceri. He reached for a piece of cheese, gasping, and Val handed it to him. "That story with the snake was quite something, I almost believed it."

"Yet it was true, every bit of it," said Kiran.

"What?"

"How could you eat a snake?" asked Bert, just as astonished. "What if you died?"

"Even if the snake is venomous, the poison is not in the flesh," answered Val. "It is safe, as long as you get rid of the head." He munched the last bite of his pie. "Mmm, that was not bad!"

"You skin it, I presume," said Bran.

"Of course. Skin it, remove the tale tip and the insides. Same as with any game."

"Ugh! That sounds disgusting."

"Pigs are more disgusting, actually, but you still like pork chops and ham."—Ceri and Bert turned to Bredan bemused—"I'm just saying, I don't think I could eat a snake either."

"What does it taste like?" was Bran curious.

Val thought for a moment. "Hmm... similar to chicken, I should say. Not very flavoured."

"And it has a lot more bones," added his son, wiping his fingers on a handkerchief.

Ceri grimaced. "I would still not eat one."

"That is your fear speaking," said Val. "But their reputation is far worse than they deserve."

"The children were less impressed than you." Kiran's smile was impish.

Ceri shrugged—*So what?*

"That's because they are more fearless than adults, I think. Until they learn

fear.” The surprise on the others’ faces made Bert blush. “I noticed that with my little nephews,” he said as though excusing himself.

“I agree with you,” said Val. “They are not just fearless, but also very curious.”

“Like the farmer’s children: so shy at first, but then they would not go to sleep,” recalled Bredan.

Bert smiled. “I think they liked Kiran very much.”

“Like attracts like,” said Bran with perfect indifference, wiping the blade of his knife with a cloth. “Time to go.” His friend bit his lip.

Kiran stood up and stretched. “Children’s instincts are remarkably similar to those of animals. They can tell the kinder people.”

“Pfff!” burst Bredan.

Bert helped Ceri stand. None of them looked either at their captain, or Kiran. Val patted his stomach with satisfaction. “I feel much better.”

The land was flattening and they picked up the pace without even thinking. Not just because they hoped to meet the Eastern Road that evening, but they were eager to return among people and reach their destination. The last four days had seemed so unnaturally long—rather like weeks—that Bran had often wondered if they were not late. Had he not kept count of the dawns, he would have been convinced their company was already in Fiodhin. Even Val and Kiran, despite their love for woods and long travels, wanted to reach the city. One of the privileges of travelling by themselves was that they could stop anywhere if they felt like it, and adjust their pace as they saw fit. Accepting to ride with these men had meant relinquishing that privilege. But, then, this was not one of their usual trips.

Rufburn was a larger village than Ulmaby. Much larger, in fact some of its most prominent people—such as the self-important owner of the Inn of the Sore Feet—affectionately called it *their little town*. It spread along the Eastern Road. The road coming from Ulmaby met this one another two days’ ride south from Rufburn, in Damerling—their company should come that way. The one they rode on met it in front of the Sore Feet.

They arrived at twilight. The inn’s shutters were open and they saw that most

tables were occupied, but the customers were not noisy. In the last few hours they had noticed a subtle change in people's air: their calm was not so much peacefulness as it was composure.

This time it was Bran and Bredan who went inside to make arrangements. At their entry the inn's guests lowered their voices, their curious gazes following them from under lowered brows, from the door all the way to the bar, or in the form of furtive side-looks. If nothing else, Bran was too tall. Moreover their bearing was military, even though the clothes were not. Enough soldiers had ridden on the Eastern Road in the last weeks that people could tell it. The innkeeper, a stout man about Val's age, with a plump face and cheeks too red, was busy behind the bar. He stopped and received them with a courteous, very well practised smile.

"Good evening, my lords, and welcome to my humble place! You seem to have travelled all day. Perhaps a warm supper and a nice bed would please you?" His manner was as polite as his smile, but there was no humbleness, either in his moves or his voice, or in the shrewd gaze of those small, hooded eyes.

"Good evening, sir," said Bredan, smiling broadly. He did not need much to sniff a man and he had missed playing his games. "Indeed that would. Might I add, what a pleasant surprise to be received by a thoughtful and obliging gentleman such as yourself."

"My lord, you are too kind," said the innkeeper with affected modesty. "It is my duty to pay attention to my patron's needs. Cale Mullen, at your service." He made a bow with a hand on his heart. "My lord...?"

"Fionn."

"My lord Fionn, a pleasure to meet you. Um, supper and bed for two, then?" Business before conversation.

"Six," said Bran.

Master Mullen's eyes sparkled. "Six, then. Very well, my lords, thank you," he said, clasping his hands. "I think I may have enough room for six more horses."

"Eleven." Bran's stern corrections were disconcerting the innkeeper.

"Eleven? Horses?"

"Yes."

The small eyes of Master Mullen became even smaller. "Eleven horses is no

small matter... I know it is not my business to say this—and please forgive me for doing so—but,” he leaned closer to them, lowering his voice, “you do not look like merchants to me... Are you?”

“And what do we look like?” asked Bredan.

The innkeeper measured them with squinty eyes, stroking his carefully trimmed beard. “Hired soldiers?” he said, almost in a whisper, throwing a quick glance towards the tables. His other customers had resumed their talking, but he knew some were trying to catch their words. People were always nosy.

Bredan did not show it, but he was beginning to enjoy the conversation. “What makes you think that?”

“Well...” trailed off the other, looking upwards at Bran, who was almost two heads above him and very serious.

“I have to say, Master Mullen, you have a sharp eye.”—The man smiled, half pleased and half uncertain whether he should, in fact, be pleased—“Can I trust you to keep a secret?”

“Certainly, my lord.” The innkeeper’s cheeks flushed brighter than their usual redness. “Discretion is a requisite for good business, is what I believe. Especially in my position,” he added, puffing out his chest a little.

“Absolutely.” Bredan leaned, waving him closer. “We are Royal Guards, under the direct command of His Royal Highness, Prince Feolan Tighal.”—Master Mullen’s eyes flared for a brief moment—“And, as I’m sure you already guessed, we are on a covert mission. Absolute discretion is imperative.”

“Certainly, but... well... I do not wish to be rude, but do you have any proof?”

Bran stiffened and his scowl made the man pull back. Bredan looked offended.

“Forgive my incredulity, but I have seen all sorts of people,” Mullen hurried to add. “Anyone can pretend to be something he is not. My reputation is at stake.”

“I cannot blame you, sir,” said Bredan, softening. “Captain, do you think we could show Master Mullen our proof?”

Bran shot his friend a disapproving look. He thought the innkeeper was insincere, that his deference was hiding an arrogant, greedy character. Were it for him, he would have left by now. But Bredan was versed in these games with

people—though perhaps he was enjoying himself a little too much—and he trusted his skills, so he pulled out the letter from his cloak, holding it in such a way as to reveal only the royal sigil and the prince's signature, and without letting the innkeeper touch the paper.

"Well, I must say! But that does look genuine." Mullen's face brightened. "I am most honoured to help His Highness's trusted men." Then he added, speaking in his usual voice, "It just so happens that I have a free room which I can put at your disposal. Unfortunately it only has four beds."

"That will suffice," said Bran. "Thank you."

"It is a superior room, I might add. The finest beds you will find in Rufburn. And I'm sure we can find room for all your horses. You need not worry about them, they will be very well attended to."

"That is very gracious of you," said Bredan in a silky voice. Then, lower, "Helping us is the same as helping the Prince himself. I'm sure His Highness will appreciate it. I will personally tell him what an *honest, solicitous and generous* man you are."

"You are too kind, my lord, but—"

"His Highness is as generous with those who serve him well, as he is unforgiving with those who try to deceive him."

Master Mullen wanted to object, but reconsidered. "Of course," he said, forcing a smile. It looked as if he had a tooth-ache. "It is my pleasure."

Before eating they wanted to see the room. It was basic, but clean, and indeed had beds, slightly better than the ones in the Garrison. Arranged side by side, with no gaps between them, four beds were quite enough for six people. Most important, the room was all theirs and Master Mullen had left them the key.

Bert slumped on the mattress. The cloth covering it smelled of cheap soap and fresh air, almost successfully disguising the mustiness of the old wool stuffing. "I nearly forgot what it's like to sleep on a bed."

"And *I* have not been so diverted in a while," said Bredan with a satisfied grin, following Bert's example. "People are truly fascinating."

"You just like to play with them," commented Bran. He listened to the door for a moment. "Try to keep your voices down."

"I think Master Mullen deserved it," said Ceri. "He was too nosy."

Bert agreed.

“Was it necessary, though?” asked Bran, sitting on a bed.

“Oh, please! He would have ripped us off had we not scared him a little.”

“Because you mentioned His Highness. I don’t approve of using his letter like that.”

“Was it not High-Captain Pryce who said to use it, if necessary?”

“I don’t like that man,” said Bran. “I would have preferred to give him less details.”

“Hmm...” Bredan stared at the oiled timber on the ceiling. The orange light of the lamps was bringing out every crack and stain on it. “He is self-important, affected and fairly greedy, but not malicious.”

“Nor foolish, he does have a sharp eye.”

“As expected from a successful man in his business. I find him very entertaining.”

“Tsk! That’s why I let you do the talking.”

“That is all well and good, but could you explain again why I must play some mysterious character?” asked Kiran, moving away from the window and pushing back his hood.

“Because he has a penchant for drama,” answered Bran.

“Because a little mystery makes our story more believable,” corrected him Bredan. “I daresay Master Mullen will not venture to ask more questions, but I suspect he will be very solicitous. Even if lodging the prince’s men will not fill his pockets as he hoped, partaking in their secret will make him feel important.”

“But why me?”

Bredan rose on one elbow. “Are you not the most mysterious of us?”

Indeed, when Kiran had stepped into the main hall, with the hood pulled over his face all the way to the tip of the nose, walking tall and graceful, the whole place had turned quiet. People had gaped at him with interest, amazement, confusion and, to a lesser degree, apprehension. Bredan’s idea had had a strong effect.

“Wonderful,” said Kiran. “Now I must eat with a hood over my face.”

The innkeeper’s behaviour confirmed Bredan’s words. He was attentive during dinner and in the morning, and very discreet. The horses were well

attended to. And when they paid, he was fair in his claims for his services and assured them their secret will be safe with him. Perhaps he looked a little disappointed, but not resentful. Bredan praised him and his establishment, promising to recommend the inn and to put a good word for him with His Highness. That seemed to console Master Mullen, or at least his pride.

* * *

There was a familiar rap on the door. The signal. A tall, slender man went behind the door, silent as a cat, his hand hovering above the knife strapped to his belt.

“Come in!”

The door opened and a short, thin man slipped into the room, closing it behind him. He looked haggard and his clothes were dirty, his boots caked with mud. The one behind the door relaxed.

“News, sir!” said the small one in a raspy, huffed voice.

At the table near the window were three men, all of whom turned at the same time towards the newcomer. Two of them were standing, the third was seated. There was a map spread on the table, a large pitcher and two mugs. A pair of pigeons, each in a distinct colour, stirred and cooed in a birdcage on the window sill. The seated person, a man who could have been past the middle of his life, with likeable, yet unreadable features and clever eyes, motioned towards the pitcher.

“Sit down and have some water first,” he said to the small man. “You look awful.”

One of the other two, a fellow with a round face and fleshy lips and a small scar at the right corner of his mouth, which made him look as if he were constantly smirking, poured from the pitcher into one of the mugs and handed it to his comrade. “You look like shite even by our standards, Ott. Is your mount still alive or did you have to walk here?”

The small man named Ott gulped down the water in one breath. “Thank you, sir.” He threw his comrade a miffed side-look, sitting on one of the beds without regard for his dirty clothes or the clean covers. “Hired horses to get here as fast

as I could. The damn rain made the road a nightmare. Waters are swollen.”

The older man let him catch his breath, then asked, “What news, Ott?”

“We found him, sir. We met him in Keln, five days ago.”

The clever eyes dilated briefly. “How certain are you that it was him?”

“As certain as we can be with what we know. We could not speak with him, but he fits best. He has the right age, he’s a doctor and his name is Valan, we heard someone calling him.”

“And the woman?”

Ott’s shoulders stooped slightly. “There was no woman, sir,”—“No woman...” echoed his commander—“but he had company, five men, and we could tell they were young soldiers, all but one. That one was his son.”

“I thought he had no family.” The commander turned to the other men and they all shook their heads. “Torben?”

“No sir,” said the third man at the table, whose voice sounded too soft for him. “No wife or children at the time. But that was fifteen years ago.”

“You said a man, Ott? Not a child, say one of fifteen or less?”

“That one was no child, sir. Never seen a child so tall.”

“Sir,” said Torben, struck by a thought, “the beggar we spoke to in Ardaena last year said the same thing. When he told us about the... fiend, as he called that person, he kept saying *him*.”

“And I hear about it now because...?”

“We asked him about it, but he was not certain or even concerned about the gender. He said *he was not himself* when they met and that the person could have been just as well a woman.”

The man with the constant smirk snorted. “What sort of idiot would confuse the two?”

“We assumed he was intoxicated at the time of the event. It was dark and everything happened fast, according to him, so he couldn’t tell the difference. That’s why we were not concerned about the detail.” The commander’s stare, unreadable though it were, made Torben regret his decision. Would their searches have ended sooner had he mentioned that detail? He doubted that. “But he did say that person was tall and long haired.”

The commander turned to Ott. “Did the doctor say that was his son?”

“The man they were speaking with did. And they confirmed. Sir, we couldn’t

see him all that well, what with his hooded cloak and the rain and everything, but there was something about the son... I cannot put my finger on it, but even Fris and Ulfer thought he had a different air. There was something of the *forest people* in him."

"Did you hear his name?"

Ott's tired mind tried to recall the conversation he had heard five days back. "Um, I think it was... Kiran? Yes."

The commander's lips twitched and one corner rose. Only a bit, as if he understood something the others did not. "Where are they?"

"They were heading to Fiodhin, but they took a different road. Our men are following them." Ott stood with a soft grunt and came to the table to look at the map. He found Keln and then the road his comrades had taken the morning he had set off to Damerling, to bring the news to their commander. "This one. They must ride through the forest, Fris wants to make his move there."

The man at the door came to look at the map as well. "That road leads to Rufburn," he said. "They could be there by now."

"Or not," said Torben. "These are hills and the rain could have been worse there. Ott just said the waters are swollen."

"Fiodhin," said the commander, ignoring their talk. "Interesting, yes..."

Ott did not understand. "Sir?"

"A bird came in this morning. The message says the man named Valan was heading to Vessar."

"So?"

"He was expecting us," understood Torben.

"Someone must have warned him. Them. So they left false directions."

"Trying to throw us off their scent," added the one with the smirk. His full lips stretched in a smug smile. "They thought they could outwit us."

"In fact they did, Dagr," the commander replied bluntly. "For eleven years. And even now they know we are looking for them, which means we made a mistake. Meeting them in Keln was pure luck."

"They are very confident to come so close to us," said Torben. "I would not have expected this."

The commander agreed with a slow nod.

"About time we had some luck," huffed Ott. He closed his eyes, pressing

them with his fingers.

"You should eat something and rest, Ott, you do look terrible. Dagr, go downstairs with him. And ask them to send some washing water here. We shall set off to Rufburn before dawn."

"Yes, sir," replied Dagr. He opened the door and pushed Ott outside—"Off you go"—following him. "The pork chops are good..." his voice was cut off by the closing of the door.

"Erig, tell the innkeeper we shall leave tomorrow. No breakfast, but some travel food would be good."

"Yes, sir," said the tall, slender man.

The commander then turned his attention to the map in front of him, but the sound of boots pausing in front of the door made him raise his head. "Yes?"

"Sir," Erig began hesitantly, "I know it's none of our business, but..."

"If you know, you should not ask."—The man bit his lip, turned, paused again, then reached to open the door—"Go ahead," said his commander, stopping his hand.

Erig turned and approached. "Why is His Majesty so bent on finding this Eina? Eleven years is a long time to look for someone. It sounds like an obsession."

"It is an obsession," said Torben. He had been on this hunt longer than others.

"Is she really that worthwhile? Or is she a danger to him?"

"Danger?" The older man leaned back in the chair. "You could say she is dangerous."

"How dangerous can she be? She is running from us. Why don't we just get rid of her?" The commander's flat expression did not change, but the disapproving gaze made Erig bite his tongue.

"Because the king said we are not to harm a hair on her head and we do not question his orders, Erig," replied his superior. "Or his reasons. Gods forbid that we ever break them!"

Fearless as they were, that reminder made the two men quiver. "Yes, sir."

"I'll tell you this, though—and only because the news did wonders for my mood—that Eina is or has something that is both valuable and dangerous. His Majesty's obsession is proof of that value, but we don't know how dangerous

she—or he, apparently—is. Eina are strange enough as they are. We must be very careful.”

Erig nodded. “Forgive me, sir. I’ll make the arrangements for tomorrow.”

“See that you do,” said the commander, returning to the map.

“Sir,” said Torben, after his comrade left, “how can we be sure we found the right people?”

“We cannot, not until we talk to them. But this is our best lead so far.”

“And when we shall?”

“Leave that to me.” He traced the Eastern Road with his finger. “Two days from Damerling to Rufburn,” he muttered. “Too long, Fris and Ulfer could indeed be there by now. We should move fast.”

“What do we do if they are not in Rufburn? I mean, if they get there before us, how long can they afford to wait?”

“They cannot,” said his superior, his eyes still on the map. “But since Fiodhin is heavily guarded, they will return to Damerling. Either way we shall meet.”

“But what if...” Torben paused and then changed his mind. That wretched soul from Ardaena had not seemed in his right mind. Fear can damage people to a great extent. He had often felt they were on a sleeveless errand.

The commander raised his eyes. “Our mission always comes first. If that man and his son *somehow* manage to elude capture, they will most likely continue to Fiodhin. The city is protected, it’s the best choice they have.”

“We’ll go after them.”

“They may know we are looking for them, but they have no idea how many we are. If Fris and Ulfer fail, we’ll catch them there.” He took out a small purse and handed it to Torben. “See what else we have to pay and help Erig. And tell Ott and Dagr to hurry up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll send a message to Fiodhin,” he said, pulling a slip of paper from under the map. “Even if those two reach the city, they will not be able to leave it without our knowledge. Not anymore... In fact not without us.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Where one journey ends, another begins

The morning sun was streaming through the tall, narrow window, casting a bright, distorted impression of it on the rough floor. But even so the antechamber seemed rather dark and cold. Perhaps because the ceiling was too tall for its size, or because the grey stone walls lacked embellishments and none of the lanterns hanging on them were lit. There was a wood bench on one side of the room, made of solid oak, old and polished from use. Only the wall towards the prince's suite was covered with large wool tapestries, above and on either side of the door, but even those were plain, dyed a dark green and with the royal crest woven in the middle, of a dull yellow. The Royal Palace in Ardaena was beautiful, a true statement of the wealth and power of the king—having been improved and adorned by many generations—but the castle in Fiodhin was intended to be practical. Nonetheless it was the largest and most impressive building in the city, dominating it with its solid walls and tall towers. From the window Bran and Bredan could see the sea of steep roofs laying beyond the castle's ramparts, all the way to the city walls and beyond.

The heavy door to the chambers opened and an old, amiably looking man came to them. He was Prince Feolan's personal attendant.

"His Highness is asking for you."

"Thank you," said Bran.

The old man followed them inside.

His Highness's study was brighter than the antechamber, though similarly restrained in style. The dark curtains framing the two large windows were made of thick velvet and looked extremely heavy. Many lanterns hung between the windows and on the opposite wall, to their left. In front of that wall was the prince's desk, solid and surprisingly plain, covered in papers. The wax candles in the candelabra which sat on it were almost completely melted and the air in the room was stale and smelled of smoke. On the wall to the next room, between the door and the windows, was a large fireplace. Prince Feolan was leaning in a chair in front of it, staring at the fire. The breakfast placed on the table by his side was untouched.

"Your Highness." They bowed.

“Ah, you’re here,” said the prince, turning to them. He blinked as if waking up from a dream. His face was drawn and sallow, but the most shocking part was the beard. He was always shaven, or, at most, had a short stubble after longer nights, but never a fully fledged beard. It had a dramatic effect: he looked much older and harder to recognize. They could not help staring. The prince smiled. “I thought I should try it. It seems to shock everyone who has not seen me in the last weeks.”

Bran frowned. “Your Highness, you look unwell.”

“It’s nothing,” he replied, with a dismissive wave of the fingers. “Just late night work. Grab some chairs and come sit near the fire... Have you had any breakfast?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” They were not lying.

The prince’s eyes studied the food on the table without enthusiasm. After only a couple of hours of sleep, his stomach felt tight. He decided on a grape. “Feel free to help yourself.”

Even if they had been hungry, they would not have taken him up on that invitation.

“Glanmour, bring two more cups of wine, please!”

“Yes, Your Highness.” The old man bowed and left.

“How was your journey?” asked His Highness.

“...Interesting,” said Bran.

“You hesitated, right now.” The prince popped a fat grape in his teeth and smiled tiredly. “Tell me.”

They had reported to the castle the previous evening, as soon as they had arrived in Fiodhin, however the prince was holding a private counsel and had sent them word to return early in the morning. Now they gave him a full account of the main events of their journey: the comrades getting sick, the meeting with Val and Kiran, their joining the cavalry and the days after leaving Keln by themselves. Bran did most of the talking, with occasional help from Bredan. Prince Feolan was listening with increasing interest, nibbling on his breakfast, interrupting them here and there for more details. Absorbed in their story, he ate his food without noticing and the colour slowly returned to his face. He was no longer sagging in his chair and his eyes were sparkling with curiosity and even enjoyment.

"I was told," he said, "that you brought some new horses with you." He sipped from his wine. "And that some of you require a little medical attention."

Bran had skipped every part which involved the Host. Firstly because it was not their secret and was wholly unrelated to their mission. Had they not been attacked in Daweldwig, they would never have learned it anyway. Moreover, Kiran had turned out to be decent person and had helped them a great deal. It would have been unfair towards him to betray his secret and, most likely, put him in danger. He trusted the prince, but loyalty, however deep and well founded, had never replaced his own judgement. In cases such as that the less people knew, the better. Secondly, he thought they would never meet again and hoped King Arne's movements and his pursuit of the Host were two different matters. He had agreed with Bredan and Bert and Ceri that they shall not speak with anyone about it. They owed Kiran that much. But being attacked by highway robbers was not unusual, nor was it strange that the four of them would manage to subdue—not kill, for it was not advisable to mention that—said robbers and take their possessions.

"Had we not been in a hurry, we would have brought those bastards here," said Bran, without even blinking. "But I think it will take some time before they will have the strength or nerve to do that again."

"Ha, ha, yes. And yet, you seem unsatisfied," noticed Prince Feolan. He was a perceptive man. "But right now we have other problems." In the last hour since they were talking, the fatigue seemed to have left his body. And it was not only thanks to finishing almost all the food on the table.

Glanmour had gathered the empty dishes and had taken them away, leaving the wine and the plate with what was left of the fruits. They were alone. The fire was burning; the old attendant had placed more wood in the hearth before leaving the room and the bright flames were feeding on it, giving off a comforting warmth. The prince leaned forth in his chair, resting the chin on his hands—the left cupped protectively around the right fist—and watching them as though trying to decide on something. That worried them.

"Straight to the matter, then," he made up his mind. "You know King Arne's cousin, Prince Endre. His mother is the younger sister of late King Frode. On the surface, he and the king seem to have a good relationship, but in truth they don't see eye to eye on many things, particularly the king's latest campaign. Now,

Prince Endre—or his mother, for that matter—does not have much say in the king's decisions, though with the royal offspring so young, he would be next in line to the throne. Perhaps that's why. I think King Arne fears the Prince's betrayal, so he made sure to limit his authority. Nonetheless, Prince Endre has his own followers, some of them fairly powerful men in the Court.

"During the last year I managed to keep contact with him, in secret, seeing as both of us share similar views regarding his sovereign. I am not very acquainted with their family affairs—nor have any intention to meddle in them—but it's safe to say neither of us wishes a conflict. On our side, my family, Senral Keer and the person who delivered the messages are the only ones who know about this. Hopefully. And now you." He paused, absently rubbing his forehead. "To cut a long story short, Prince Endre had plans to overthrow his cousin and take the throne for himself, until his older nephew comes of age, should King Arne not change his mind—so far, it seems he has not. The prince and my family made an agreement to support each other and join forces.

"The problem, however, is that something has happened and I cannot get in contact with him anymore. Either our correspondence has been discovered or he changed his mind—which is unlikely, unless I've lost my instinct with people—but my courier has not been able to meet his in the last month. And that worries me... Have I missed something, I wonder..." He noticed Bredan's gaze. "Yes?"

"Your Highness—"

"Skip the formality."

"Um, are you certain Prince Endre was not—pardon my impertinence—playing you?"

Prince Feolan studied him and, for a moment, Bredan regretted crossing the line. But then the prince leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes and rubbing them slowly, from the bridge of the nose out. "I was as certain as one can ever be, until now." He looked up at them. "No, even now I am convinced it was not the case. But I'm not a fool. I may have given him some information, but I have not told him everything we think or plan. Politics is never an entirely honest game." Honest? No, politics was not about honesty, it was about finding the right compromise. And doing the best to ensure that the other party keeps its end of the bargain.

"Forgive me, Your Highness," said Bredan, lowering his head. "It was not

my place to ask.”

“If only you were the first. But it’s a reasonable question... However, the situation at the border is strange right now. Our scouts have confirmed the king’s forces are stationary. Camped and waiting, but we don’t know what for.”

“That is strange,” said Bran. “Camping an army for a long time is a waste of resources.”

“*Massive* resources,” stressed Prince Feolan. “Not to mention the effect it has on people’s morale and discipline. The longer you keep your army waiting, the more you weaken its determination and cohesion. I do not believe a man like King Arne is unaware of that.” He stood and went to the window, staring outside. “This might seem to our advantage, but the same rules apply to our own army. If Arne doesn’t make a move, we must.”

“Are you planning an attack?”

“Fates, no! We cannot be the ones to strike first, even if he is trying to provoke us. And military decisions are not my prerogative. But I want to use this opportunity to find out the reason behind Prince Endre’s silence. Whether our agreement still stands or not. Perhaps that would give us the answers we need.”

“But you said your courier has not been able to make contact with his,” said Bredan.

“You want us to go to Vres?” asked Bran.

The prince turned to face them. “I want you to accompany me to Vres.”

For a long moment the two of them were silent, not knowing if they heard well.

“But, Your Highness—” started Bran.

“We don’t have time for couriers anymore. I must try to speak with the prince. Personally.”

“But it’s too risky!” burst out Bran. “Think about it, Your Highness, what if we are caught? The leverage King Arne would have if he held the Second Prince of Laeden prisoner. It would mean the end for our kingdom!”

“No, Captain. It would mean the end for me.”—Bran and Bredan were staring horrified—“And quite possibly for those joining me. I am aware of that. And I am willing to take the risk.” He raised a hand to stop further objections. “I am not asking for counsel, *I am telling you*. The decision has been made. I am, first and foremost, a diplomat. It is my duty to serve my kingdom in any way I

can and, right now, this is the best I can think of.”

“What about our neighbours?” tried Bran. “Therras is, perhaps, too far, but Vessar—”

“Vessar does not wish to involve itself in a conflict which doesn’t concern it. I cannot blame them, we each have our own problems. If things take a bad turn, they promised to give us military assistance, but only if it turns out we cannot deal with the problem ourselves.”

“By then it could be too late!”

“I know, Captain. But right now we have no arguments to convince them otherwise. They have their own agreements with Astur to keep. As long as this conflict does not affect Vessar, they will not participate.”

“But it could. Who says King Arne wants to stop here?”

“Who, indeed. The way they see it, though, the problem is ours. Food and medicine they are willing to provide, but not weapons or soldiers. Astur would see it as a declaration of war. If they have any future plans with regards to our neighbours, Vessar will not give them reasons to carry them in advance.”

Silence fell over the room. They had had no idea the situation was so murky and uncertain. And, therefore, so complicated. King Evand had not wished to sow panic throughout the country before he could understand what was happening. For now it looked rather like a display of forces, a battle of wills. And a substantial waste of resources.

Prince Feolan was the first to speak. “Going back to our plan, as I said, we are aware of the risk and willing to take it. The King has given his consent. If worst comes to the worst, his duty is also to the kingdom, not to me. This matter is settled.” He returned to his chair. “Of course, I cannot go as the Second Prince anymore. The time for official meetings and negotiations is gone. We tried that already. King Arne pretends we were the first to gather our forces and—anyway, the point is that door has closed.”

“You want to sneak in through the back door?” Bredan sounded almost impressed.

“That’s the idea.”

“Is this the reason behind the beard?”

“It was worth trying. It seems to work.”

“It might, especially on those who have only seen Your Highness a few

times.”

Prince Feolan's lips stretched into a rueful smile. “Even though this was my plan, I have no desire to die.”

“Why would King Arne leave the back door unguarded?” asked Bran.

“Good question. We don't know that he did, we just hope so.” The prince leaned back, staring at the vaulted ceiling. “Why is he not making any move? He doesn't want to talk, yet he halted his advance. The atmosphere around the border is tense, yet trading has not been suppressed. People are still moving across it. We don't know what is happening, but apparently something else is holding his attention at the moment. It is what I want to take advantage of.”

“Not that I would complain about anything that gives us more time,” said Bredan, “but what could be so important as to distract him from this whole mess he has started?” And just then he realized a possible reason. By the looks of it, Bran was thinking about the same thing.

“I don't know,” said the prince, looking back at them. “Most likely something in the palace. I just hope it's not Prince Endre.”

There was no knocking at the door. It just opened. Bran and Bredan jumped to their feet and dropped on one knee, bowing.

“Your Highness.”

“Brother? Good morning.”

“Good morning,” said Prince Aydan, coming to seat in one of the chairs. He looked just as tired as his sibling. “You look terrible!”

“Take a look in the mirror,” replied Prince Feolan.

“Did you tell them?”

“Just now.”

“You may stand,” told them Prince Aydan. “Did you explain them the details?”

“I was getting there.”

“We'll do that later.” He paused, watching his little brother with a critical eye. “Damn, I cannot get used to that beard!”

Prince Feolan chuckled. “If it's any consolation, neither can I.”

The other two remained standing. The First Prince was four years older than the Second. They had seen him a few times, but had never spoken to him before. He was said to be less approachable than his brother, but it was probably

because of his standing and duties as Crown Prince, rather than his character. He seemed comfortable enough being informal in front of them.

“If you’re determined to do this, you’ll have to bear with it,” said Prince Aydan. He did not look happy with the idea, though. Of course he was not, since it put his brother in danger. He loved him. They had been close ever since childhood. “Anyway, I came because I wanted to speak with you.” He pulled out a paper from his robe and turned to the Captain. “This grants you two free access to the castle’s library. You have three days to refresh your Asturan and learn as much as possible about their customs, occupations, rules—as far as we know them—and so forth. Since you travelled there before, it should not be too hard. Ask the archivist for help.”

Bran took the paper. It was a letter bearing the First Prince’s sigil. “Yes, Your Highness.”

“We shall hold another meeting tonight, to acquaint you with the plan,” added Prince Feolan. “Everyone involved will be present. I’ll send for you when it’s time.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“I hope you understand the degree of secrecy required by this mission,” said Prince Aydan, fixing his eyes on them. They were colder than his brother’s, perhaps because of their light colour, but just as clever. “You are forbidden to speak about it with anyone, aside from us. You are forbidden to speak about it outside this room. Doing so will be considered an act of high treason... Do you understand that?” High treason was punishable by death.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“You are dismissed. Oh, and send Glanmour here.”

They did not speak before they were out of the castle walls. They did not stop at the library, nor at the Garrison, or the Wild Boar, or at Deep Bottoms. They needed to walk, to get rid of the tension and sort their thoughts, so they wandered the busy streets, aimlessly, until they felt calm enough to talk. They made their way to the river, to one of the secondary bridges. People were using those every day, but they were not for carts and horses, so they were less noisy than the main, larger ones. Back home the river was often a place to walk to when they wanted a little privacy without walls. They could see anyone coming

from either way, or fishing on the river banks or in a boat.

When they were alone in the middle of the bridge, Bran finally broke the silence. "I wasn't expecting that." He rested his elbows on the wooden parapet, watching the fast current flowing underneath. He noticed a few fish.

"I was expecting something audacious from him, but this... this is downright insane! If someone else said it, I would laugh at how absurdly insane it is."

Bran turned to his friend, surprised. "Are you scared?"

Bredan was leaning with his back against the parapet, staring at the sky. "Shitless," he answered, without looking at him. It sounded almost like a joke, if not for the restrained alarm in his voice.

"That is unlike you." Bran had only seen him truly scared when Ama had fallen seriously ill and that night, in the glade of Daweldwig. "I, too, am alarmed by the recklessness of this plan—"

"Insanity."

"—But aren't you the one who is fond of reckless deeds and getting into trouble?"

"Well, forgive me for still having some sense of self-preservation left."

Bran's eyes turned back to the fish in the the water. "You'll get the chance to trick people and learn secrets for a noble purpose. It used to be your favourite diversion. I would have expected you to be more excited about it."

Bredan sighed. "Perhaps I would be, if it weren't for this whole mess. And His—*him*."

"Why? You've seen him enough to know he is no fool."

Three men, straining to move a cart with oven—the sort used for baking pies on the street—almost toppled over, when a group of children ran past them, laughing and squealing. The men shouted after them, throwing a few curses. After a while they were alone again.

"Don't you understand, Bran? This would be like walking into Lords 'n Ladies with a pouch full of gold dangling on your belt, hoping no one will hear the coins chinking. Even I know better than that." Lords 'n Ladies was a watering hole on one of the streets in Lower Quarters in Ardaena, a notorious meeting spot for the city's refuse, known for harbouring illegal activities. "I don't know if he can play the part."

"...You worry about his manner?"

“And his habits. There will be no attendants, no decorum, no comfort. I’m certain he will relinquish them, but will he be able to stay in his character?” It was a sensible argument.

Bran straightened. “Let’s see what that character is, first. In any case, I think he will not refuse any advise, should you feel he needs some.”

“I suppose.”

“Besides, if we didn’t go, we would have to stay here and, most probably, fight. Either way it could end badly.”

“For some reason, fighting sounds less bad.” Bredan chuckled, although not out of amusement.

“We don’t know that.”

More people crossed the bridge. A child leaned on the parapet and dropped his piece of bread in the water. The fish gathered, ripping it apart with voracious appetite. The child burst out crying and his mother pulled him away, chiding him for being careless.

“Do you think the reason for Arne’s distraction is Kiran?” asked Bredan.

“You thought so, too?”

“Mhm... I wonder what they are doing. I got used to their company.”

“Valan left me an address for an apothecary. He said to ask about them there, if we need to talk.”

“They are very interesting people, don’t you think? In a good way.”

“Kiran, I’ve been wanting to ask this for some time, do you ever influence people’s emotions?” To be precise, the question was bothering him ever since that night, in the glade.

“Why do you ask that?”

“I know a few things about it. Bran says I like to play with people’s minds and emotions. I say I sometimes steer them in the right direction.”

“Right for you?” asked Kiran.

Bredan just smiled. “You said Eina can read and touch the hearts. You can change people’s emotions without them even knowing, am I right?”

“It is within our abilities. But we must never do that outside healing work, unless we have no choice. We can read the emotions, but it is

forbidden to influence people without a good reason. It would ruin the balance.”

“So... did you influence ours?”

Kiran paused and that, in itself, was an answer. One which, to Bredan's surprise, disappointed him a little. He enjoyed being proven right, but not this time.

“That night I told you my story...” started Kiran, staring ahead, “during my story, I kept an eye on your hearts. I... I dampened your fear. I knew how terrified of me you were, you thought I was an abomination. Of course you wanted answers, but curiosity alone would not have made you overcome your horror and disgust. I wanted a chance to explain myself. To show you who I am.” He turned to Bredan. “At the time I wanted to believe I did that for you, but it was for me. I'm really sorry.”

In your place I never would have admitted that, thought Bredan with a sense of relief. “I thought so,” he said, smiling.

“Bredan! Are you listening?”

“Oh! I was thinking about a conversation I had with Kiran yesterday,” said Bredan. He stretched.

“Anything worth mentioning?”

“Just talk.”

“Then let's go back,” said Bran. “We have an assignment and not much time for it. And I want to stop by the Garrison.”

“Right. Thanks to him, Ceri is recovering. The doctor thinks he is just bruised.”

“Let him think so.”

They left the bridge with a brisk step.

“Let's grab something to eat on our way,” said Bredan, livelier than before.

“Already?”

* * *

“Manee? Danaa? I’m home!”

The house was empty. Everything looked the same as when he left: the sitting room, the dining room, the kitchen, even the herbs bundles hanging on the walls and a bucket of milk, only no one was home. It looked as if his family had simply left, forsaking everything. The village, too, was empty. The vegetable garden was neat and clean, as though someone had tended to it recently, but the whole place was quiet. He saw butterflies dancing in the light streaming through the foliage, but he heard no birds.

“Omanee! Odanaa!” His grandparents were gone, too. “Manee! Danaa!” His voice sounded strange in his ears, like that of a child. He looked down and realized he was small. His hands were small, his bare feet were small, his whole body was that of a child before Becoming. He was fourteen. He was Kiri.

The house was empty. Everything looked as he remembered, but the place was deserted and overgrown. Vines had crept in through the windows and the roof in the main room, spreading through the house, claiming it for themselves. A young tree was growing in the middle of the hearth and its branches had almost broken through the roof. The whole village was overgrown with saplings, creepers and ferns, as if the forest were reclaiming its land and trying to erase all traces of his people.

“Manee! Danaa! Where are you? Where is everyone?” Fear crept into his heart. He ran into the house, pushing his way through the intertwined vines, searching everywhere. But he was small and weak and the vines were tough, scratching, bruising and tripping him. When he finally reached his room, his heart fluttered. A man was lying in his bed. Not his father, nor his grandfather, yet that face was familiar. “Val?” His eyes were open, but he seemed dead. “Val!” Slender runners shot from the vines, covering the dead body and leafing, until the bed looked like a green cocoon. “Val, no! Don’t go! Don’t leave me!”

He was alone. Alone. “Don’t leave me,” he whimpered. His heart was sinking and his mind was drowning in fear. *They left me alone. All of them left me.* He could not breathe.

A hand sprung out of nowhere to grab him. It had a ring on the ringfinger, made of gold: two serpents twisting around a large, red stone. He had seen that ring before. The king’s ring. Strong fingers curled around his wrist and the arm was joined by a second, grabbing his other wrist. Behind him he felt a strong

body. A man. That man.

Now I've got you, he heard a silky whisper in his ear. *I always get what I want*. A soft, seductive voice, but forceful and foreboding. It sent shivers of horror through him, breaking his heart.

Arne! There was no doubt about it. His vision blurred and, through the tears welling up, unstoppable, he saw his village in ruin and his house crumbled, a tree in the middle of it soaring to the sky. But even that was shrivelling. The forest was dying. The whole world was withering and falling apart before his eyes, while he struggled to no avail in the painful grip of those hands. Of that man who did not understand. Of that king who lusted for a power he was not supposed to possess. What could a mere child do against him? Alone.

You are not alone. That voice was familiar, though it was more a thought than a voice. And it was not his.

"But they are gone! And Val is dead," he cried. It was his voice, again, Kiran's voice. He was Kiran. "He caught me. Everything is dying." The world was crumbling around him—the village, the forest, life—and he was trapped. He heard his own cry of despair.

What you see is not real. It is your fear.

My fear?

Yes. A dream. This is a dream.

Wake up, he thought. *Wake up!*

His eyes snapped open. He was free. The hands holding him were gone, as if they had not been there at all. There was no one behind him. He could not see that, but he sensed it. The world disappeared. He was in darkness and could see nothing, but he was alone. *Just a dream*, he thought with a sense of relief. *Just my fear. That did not happen.*

But it could, said that other thought.

Kiran gasped. *I'm not awake!* The darkness brightened with thousands of familiar lights. *Oh, I'm here.*

You are.

That voice before, that was you?

It was me.

So my family is not gone? He was drifting with that warm river of light.

I don't know.

Fear pierced his heart again. Painfully. *I must go back. I must see them.*

It is dangerous.

I must see that place one more time. To know it is there, to know it is safe.

And the Blessed Grounds.

That was just a dream. Your fear. But we must go back, so that what you saw does not happen.

Wake up!

His eyes snapped open. His heart was beating too fast and he was hot and sweaty. Above him the rafters were sloping towards his feet, old, stained and full of tiny cracks in the light that washed over them. Kiran blinked, trying to remember his surroundings—this was their small room at the Silver Oak. In Fiodhin. He pushed himself up. The bells were tolling the morning hours. How late was it? The streets were astir. In front of the window someone was watching the morning bustle beneath. The rustle of the blanket drew his attention and he turned. Kiran's heart fluttered.

"Good morning," said Val with his usual, gentle smile. "It was about time you woke up. I'm hungry."

Dear reader,

I hope you enjoyed this book.

For the time being Book Two is still in embryo stage and it will take a while for it to grow up into a proper book. Another year or so, I was hoping, but, since I cannot afford to focus on it exclusively, it might take twice as long. For pragmatic reasons, after a year spent writing Book One, I find myself pressed to return to my main activity.

Would you be willing to help me focus on Book Two? If so, please consider donating a small sum via PayPal. Visit King's Host website, Book Two section, and use the donate button. Your help will be much appreciated.

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Thank you!

APPENDIX

Races

EINA

An old race of humans who inhabit a vast, ancient forest, on the northern border of Astur. To the west the forest reaches the mountains of Laeden, but nobody knows how far north it spreads. It is not known whether Eina were born in that forest or had moved there from somewhere else, though the former seems more likely. They lead a simple life, are organized in tribes and do not have a king, nor do they claim possession of the forest. However the oldest member of a tribe acts as a leader. Eina are tall and fair people and live up to two hundred and fifty years. They are a peaceful, gentle race, and have a very strong bond with living creatures, as well as trees and plants. Eina are skilled healers and have a deep understanding of the living world. They also have knowledge about Edesil, the World of Radiance, which exists at the same time with the human world, but is hidden from it.

Enma - an Eina tribe, living at the border with Astur. Kiri and his family belong to this tribe. Enma live in several villages.

Niseth - an Eina tribe living a little further from the border with Astur than Enma. Arryn comes from this tribe, but became part of Enma after wedding Keryon.

MAN

A race of humans who is younger than Eina and who arrived in those lands much later in history. Man live about one hundred years and are similar to us. Most characters in the story belong to this race.

Eina dictionary

Adj. adjective

Vb. verb

Pron. pronoun

Prep. preposition

Lit. literally

Anaana - *adj.* bright, illuminating; also glowing.

Ay - *prep.* of, relating to, belonging to. Possibly from aye, seen as a blessing.

Aye - *noun* blessing.

Ayesi - *adj.* sacred, blessed.

Daar - *noun* growth.

Edesti, ede - *noun* world.

Ee - yes.

Eide, ei - *adj.* very old, ancient.

Eli - *noun and adj.* old, aged, elder; also a polite prefix when addressing one's elder.

Fai, fa - *noun and adj.* young; also a polite prefix when addressing one's younger.

Fallas - *vb.* to flow, to move, to spill.

Fenna, fen - *noun* being, living creature.

Fuu - *noun* mist, moisture.

Kalasi - *noun* lightning.

Kirena - *noun* heart.

Leannas - *vb.* to heal.

Madara - *noun lit.* inherent balance.

Mae - *pron.* this.

Mai - *vb., imperative mood* wait.

Nanna, na - *noun* person, people.

Nee - *noun* gender.

Nesi, ne - *noun* sound.

Odae - *noun* feelings, emotions.

Orimi - *noun* dream, vision.

Reei - *noun* the one above everyone else, also king.

Ripa - *noun* food.

Ripas, ri - *vb.* to eat.

Sil, also **ki** - *noun* radiance, energy, light; ki can also mean radiance in the sense of warmth.

Suu - *noun* silence.

Tere, teru - *noun* place, location; also ground.

Tual - *noun* house, dwelling, one's home.

Tualas - *vb.* to live, to dwell, to inhabit.

Tualain - *noun* one who lives in his home; also used for one who receives in his home, a host.

Un - *no*.

Vhai, vha - *adj.* new, recent.

Ya - *prep.* in the middle, between.

Yun - *noun* bond, tie, connection.

Aye-tere - *lit.* Grounds of Blessings. Blessed Grounds. The place where Edesil and the human world touch and through which feya and sidaar cross into the human world. Aye-tere are said to be quiet and safe places.

Berethis, Becoming/ Becoming Ritual or Second Birth - though not exactly a ritual, it is an event in the life of each Eina, during which a yanee—a genderless child—reaches its complete form, attaining a gender. It is considered a second birth because only after the Ritual a child becomes a complete, albeit young and undeveloped, version of an adult Eina.

Danaa - *father*.

Madara - the natural order of things. The inherent balance which the worlds tend to in the absence of harmful events of significant proportions.

Edesil - World of Radiance. A world made of radiance, which exists at the same time with the human world—though distinct from it—in a symbiotic relationship. The two worlds touch only in certain places, the Aye-tere.

Eina - *ancient people*.

Feya, fenna ya edesti - *lit.* creature between worlds. Feya are the most primitive of silfen and the only ones who can cross between worlds, besides the Vhareei. Like all silfen they feed on sivha, but are believed to be able to cross because they need to feed at the source in order to grow. They eventually become silfen. In the human world feya mimic animate or inanimate things, though there are subtle differences which can give them away. They are very specialized, drawing their food only from one specific source, depending on their type.

Kiyun, short form of **Kirena ay yun** - the Bond, lit. bond of the heart. The bond Eina share with all living things. It is also the bond of a Vhareei with his Host.

Manee - mother.

Odanaa - grandfather.

Omanee - grandmother.

Reei ay tualain - King's Host. An Eina woman who hosts the Vhareei for about a hundred years, like a mother. During this time the Vhareei grows his awareness of the human world and builds his bond with it.

Reeyun, short form of **Reei ay yun** - lit. the bond of the king. A Sireei's bond with the human world.

Sidaar - lit. growth radiance. That because of which life and growth is possible. Sidaar flows into the human world through Aye-tere, feeding the living things.

Silfen - being/creature of radiance. Silfen are the beings which inhabit Edesil. They are made of pure radiance and feed on sivha. They grow and strengthen the Sireei's power.

Sireei - lit. king of radiance. A silfen which is above all the other, whose consciousness is incredibly vast and whose power keeps the balance between the two worlds. He lives about 2000 years.

Sivha - lit. new radiance. Sidaar which is fed upon in the human world transforms into sivha, which flows back into Edesil, to feed the silfen.

Vhana - new people, the name Eina use for Man.

Vhareei - lit. new king of energy. The silfen who replaces the Sireei when he reaches the end of his life. He is, presumably, born into the human world, where it spends roughly one hundred years inside an Eina host. This is necessary for him to grow his awareness of the human world and built his bond with it, so he can maintain the balance between the two worlds.

Yanee - lit. between genders; Eina children before the Becoming Ritual. Yanee don't lack gender, but rather have the potential to be both. A Man's child is the miniature—but complete—version of an adult. Yanee are incomplete versions of an adult Eina, therefore they must go through the Ritual to complete their—both physical and emotional—form.

THE FEYA IN BOOK ONE

Fenarife, fenari - feya who feed on dead creatures. They can take various forms, depending on their source of food. Fenari feeding on decaying vegetation take the shape of various fungi.

Fuurife, fuuri - feya who feed on mist / moisture. They seem to dwell mostly in woodlands, close to rivers, lakes and other sources of moisture. They look like fireflies, but their glow is silvery or blueish.

Kalarife, kalari - feya who feed on lighting. They only come out during thunderstorms. They look similar to lightning. To tell them apart, one must listen for the thunder following the lightning.

Odarife, odari - feya who feed on emotions. They mostly attach themselves to trees, mimicking a leaf of that tree. If removed and dried, they turn a light purple, though it is not known why. Eina use them in their healing, but using them without proper knowledge can be dangerous.

Orife, ori - feya who feed on dreams. They look like tiny parasite flowers which attach themselves to vines and creepers—and possibly other plants. If a creature from the human world comes too close to them, they make it fall asleep and feed on its dreams. Eina call it an orife sleep. It is sudden and can last longer than a normal sleep, therefore it can be dangerous.

Nerife, neri - feya who feed on sound. They look like hard clusters of tiny, spindle-shaped shells and take the colour of the surface they attach to. The more nerife in one place, the quieter that place grows.

Suurife, suuri - feya who feed on silence. They look like clusters of miniature icicles and take the colour of the surface they attach to. Suurife can only be seen in very quiet places. Surprisingly enough the presence of suurife does not make a place noisier. They can sometimes be found in the same places as nerife, feeding on the silence produced by the feeding of the latter.

EINA HEALING CHANT

Anaana sidaar mae edesti fallas, mae fenna leannas, mae kirena tualas - Bright sidaar, flow into this world, heal this creature, find home in this heart. One of the chants Eina use while healing someone.

Characters list

MAIN CHARACTERS

Bran Keer - a thirty years old captain of the Royal Guards. Bran is very intelligent and observant, but his stern manner makes him difficult to deal with. Nonetheless his subordinates have great respect for him. He is Bredan's closest friend and the son of the highest ranking officer of the Royal Guards. He appreciates Val, but dislikes his son from the very first meeting.

Bredan Fionn - a thirty-three years old Royal Guard and second in command after Bran. Despite having an opposite personality, he is Bran's closest friend. People are drawn to his charm and he enjoys playing with them and learning their secrets. He has a keen sense of observation and quickly takes an interest in Kiran.

Kiran Breen - the twenty-five years old adopted son of Val and central character of the book. In his home village he is regarded as an odd man because of his unusual affinity with creatures and because his past is a mystery and, generally, he is very reserved about himself. The androgynous looks make him stand out too much for his taste. Despite all that he gets along well with people, however his acquaintance with Bran starts off on the wrong foot.

Valan Breen/ Val - a fifty years old scholar and Kiran's adoptive father. He is a man of many interests, a physician as well as a skilled apothecary. He also writes books under the pen name Ellis Greene. Val is regarded as a peculiar man because he travels a lot and because, despite his amiable nature, people know very little about him. He is an avid reader and often buys books.

SECONDARY CHARACTERS

EINA

Aneri - a woman from the Enma tribe who is younger than Arryn. She and her older sister, Ethri, helped Arryn nurse Val.

Arryn - Kiri's mother. She comes from the Niseth tribe, but after wedding Keryon, she followed him to the Enma tribe. She nursed Val back to health after

her husband brought him to their home. When Val met her she was sixty-six years old.

Ethri - a woman from the Enma tribe who is older than Arryn. She and her younger sister, Aneri, helped Arryn nurse Val.

Keryon - Arryn's husband and Kiri's father. He is from the Enma tribe and has an older sister who left the village after getting married. He is the one who found Val and brought him to his home. His age is not stated, but he is older than Arryn.

Kiri - Arryn and Keryon's child, who is a yanee. He looks very much like his mother, but has his father's eyes. He was nine years old when Val first met him. It is suggested that Val taught him how to read and write.

Muun - the eldest member of the Enma tribe, he is two hundred and three years old. He lives in a different village. He was called to confirm the birth of the Host and to offer counsel. He is stronger than one would expect of a man his age. Out of respect younger Eina address him as Eli-Muun.

Talian - Keryon's father and Kiri's grandfather. His age is not stated, but he is older than his wife, Yunal. He is knowledgeable about Eina lore and traditions. He is young compared to other members of the tribe.

Yunal - Keryon's mother and Kiri's grandmother. When Val met her she was a hundred and thirty-five years old, but looked much younger than a Man woman in her sixties.

ULMABY, LAEDEN

Alden - a carpenter and one of Val's oldest friends, though younger than him. He learned his trade from Val's father, when Val was living in Ardaena. He is a widower and has a son, Noll. People think he has a strange sense of humour. He and Belesni are quite close. Along with Drest, he takes care of Val's house when he and Kiran are away.

Ansa - Drest's wife. Unlike her husband she is cheerful and always curious about others. She and Drest have two children, younger than Kiran. She is fond of Val and has a motherly attitude towards Kiran.

Belesni - a widow in her late thirties and one of Val's and Kiran's friends, who settled in Ulmaby with her late husband. A clever, independent and outspoken woman, she enjoys to banter with her friends. She makes very good

pastries. She and Alden often join forces in teasing their friends.

Drest - a smith from Ulmaby and Val's oldest and closest friend. He is younger than Val, but bigger. Unlike Ansa, he is grumpy and taciturn and dislikes to pry into other people's lives. He likes animals, particularly horses, whom he is said to get along with better than with people. He is very fond of his friends, despite not openly showing it. Along with Alden, he takes care of Val's house when he and Kiran are away.

Enid - Tam's wife, who cooks for the tavern's customers. Kiran loves her food and learned to cook from her.

Gelda - Tam's daughter. She helps her parents in the tavern. She has a sibling.

Noll - Alden's son, a few years younger than Kiran. Although he is old enough to drink, he does not hold his drink very well. He has a candid nature, which often makes him the object of their friends' jokes. Belesni seems particularly fond of picking on him, though he does not resent her for it.

Tam - the owner of Ales & Tales, the tavern which Val and his group of friends frequent. He is a short, stout man, but surprisingly quick. According to Kiran he is a very obliging person. He manages the tavern with his wife, Enid, and their two children. Sometimes, on very busy days, he hires Kiran to help them.

ARDAENA, LAEDEN

Aydan Tighal, First Prince - the Crown Prince. He is four years older than his brother.

Cerys Keer - Senral Keer's younger step-sister and Bran's aunt.

Ermid Dhal - a bookshop keeper in Upper Trade, in Ardaena, and an old friend of Val. They met during Val's stay in the capital and grew close over their love of books. He is the one Val gives his manuscripts to, for printing. Ermid is also the one who warns Val about the men looking for him.

Evand Tighal, King - the current king of Laeden and the third generation of the Royal House of Tighal.

Feolan Tighal, Second Prince - the Second Prince, who serves as a diplomat for Laeden. He is in his mid thirties, intelligent and perceptive. Sometimes he trains with the Royal Guards, which is where he met Bran and Bredan. He is an

unassuming, hard working man, who spares no effort to help his country.

Freya Keer - Senral Keer's second wife and Bran's mother.

Glanmour - Prince Feolan's personal attendant.

Idris - an apothecary from Upper Trade and one of Val's customers. He is ten years older than Val, amiable and very fond of talking.

Jade - Bredan's mother and the oldest of Madam Rose's girls. She used to be the most popular with Wild Rose's patrons, until Madam was forced to retire her because of her pregnancy. She helps Madam manage the business, which she will eventually inherit. She is a beautiful woman with a gentle, happy disposition.

Lill - one of the girls from the Wild Rose. When Bran first met her, she was in her early thirties.

Madam Rose/ Madam/ Ama - the owner of Wild Rose—one of Ardaena's most exclusive brothels—and Bredan's grandmother, though not by blood. She is a strong, intelligent and eccentric woman, who calls her establishment an *entertainment parlour* for the rich and refined. All her girls were hand-picked and polished by her, living as a family at the Wild Rose. She was Bredan's foremost tutor. When Bran first met her she was in her sixties. Despite her small stature she reminded him of his father.

KELN, LAEDEN

Master Combs - an innkeeper in Keln, who suggested Val and his group to take the shortcut through Daweldwig forest. Val and Kiran had lodged at his place four years prior to the main events. It is suggested that during their stay Val had helped a sick mistress Combs. Master Combs has a daughter, perhaps of Kiran's age or younger.

RUFBURN, LAEDEN

Cale Mullen - the innkeeper of the Inn of the Sore Feet. A short, stout man in his fifties, he comes across as friendly and obliging, but Bran and Bredan describe him as greedy, affected and self-important.

ROYAL GUARDS

Captain - lowest ranking officer and below High-Captain.

High-Captain - ranking officer below Senral.

High-Senral - highest ranking officer in the Laeden Army.

Second - the second in command after a ranking officer. Above Captain, the title can be followed by the superior officer's rank—e.g. Second of High-Captain.

Senral - highest ranking officer in the Royal Guards—above High-Captain—and second highest ranking officer in the Laeden Army—above High-Captain and below High-Senral.

Baran, High-Senral - the High-Senral of the Laeden Army. A man in his early seventies, with a gentle, elegant appearance and a velvety voice. He is reputed to be very intelligent. He was one of the men who knew the real purpose of Prince Feolan's mission in Astur, a year before the main events of the book.

Bard Keer, Senral - the head of the Royal Guards and Bran's father. In his late sixties, he is very strong and does not show his true age. Besides his senral duties, he is in charge with choosing and managing the people tasked with gathering sensitive intelligence. He is one of the king's trusted men. Bard is stern and unnerving, having a difficult personality, but is known to care deeply for his family.

Pryce, High-Captain - an officer of the Royal Guards and Bran's direct superior. A man in his fifties and a friend of Senral Keer. He knows Bran since the latter was still a boy and thinks of him almost as of a son, having trained him at his father's request. He was one of the men who knew the real purpose of Prince Feolan's mission in Astur, a year before the main events of the book.

Siams Kerry, Captain - an officer of the Royal Guards, whom Bran and Bredan sometimes train with and have a good opinion of. He is older than Bran.

Uren, High-Captain - an officer of the Royal Guards. A couple of years younger than Pryce and a stickler for rules.

Soldiers of the Royal Guards under the command of Bran:

Anwyl - a man of Bran's age, he was one of the intoxicated soldiers. He is considered the entertainer of the group, having acting talent and a good voice.

Bert - a man in his late twenties, who was left behind to watch over his intoxicated comrades. He is an open man and is considered very level-headed for

his age. Bran has a lot of confidence in him. Bert liked Kiran from the very beginning and always acts friendly towards him.

Cai - a man in his early thirties and one of the intoxicated soldiers. He is surprisingly skinny for a soldier, though he dislikes being called so. Bredan claims he is stronger than he looks and clever. He is reserved and quiet. Despite their different personalities, he is close to Owein and very protective of him.

Ceri - a man in his late twenties and one of the intoxicated soldiers. Always looking dispassionate and not very talkative, Ceri is shown to scorn his comrades sometimes. Kiran likened him to a sleeping cat who hides her claws. Later on it becomes clear he dislikes wilderness and is a little superstitious.

Glen - a man in his early forties, who was left behind in Ulmaby to watch over his intoxicated comrades. Among the men in their group he is the oldest and the only one married, also having a son. He is from the mountains and came to Ardaena in his early twenties. Though not very educated, he has a caring heart and a lot of common sense. He has a fatherly attitude towards them, especially Rowan.

Owein - a big, strong man in his late twenties who, because of his built, looks older than he is. He stayed behind in Ulmaby to help his friend Cai. Despite his looks he is very candid. Not very good with kitchen work, as he himself admits.

Rhun - a big, muscular man in his late twenties, he was one of the intoxicated soldiers and, according to his comrades, the one responsible for it. He is fond of ale and the most quick-tempered of the group, especially after drinking. He is often vulgar, though is shown to be clever and perceptive, and generally a friendly person. He and Toph are close friends, despite their different personalities.

Rowan - a man in his early twenties, who was left behind in Ulmaby to watch over his intoxicated comrades. Being the youngest and most naive makes him the object of his comrades' teasing. He is a freckled, dimpled redhead who tries to grow a beard in order to look more manly. He is eager, but gentle, and takes a quick liking to Kiran and his father. Glen acts like a father towards him and they are often together.

Toph - a man in his early thirties and one of the intoxicated soldiers. He is good looking and fair haired, which makes him very successful with women. He stands out among his comrades, being refined—almost pedantic—and well

educated, although a little conceited. Unlike most of his comrades he prefers wine to ale. He is shown to mock Rhun, though in truth they are close friends.

ASTUR

Arne, King - the current ruler of Astur. He is said to be more reserved than his father, former King Frode. He shows interest in Eina and their lore, apparently after reading an old book about them. It is implied he knows something about Edesil and the Sireei. Less than a year after his coronation news about the birth of the Vhareei reached him and he paid a visit to the Enma tribe, expressing a particular interest in Kiri. He did not leave a good impression on the Eina. For reasons yet unclear Arne gathered his army at the border with Laeden, which was seen as a declaration of war.

Endre, Prince - King Arne's cousin and King Frode's nephew. Prince Endre does not agree with his cousin's plans of starting a war with Laeden and intends to overthrow him, until Arne's offspring would be of age. He has a secret agreement with the Royal House of Laeden to support each other in the upcoming war.

Frode, King - the former king of Astur, now deceased, and Arne's father. He was said to have been a wise and sensible man, though not very open. During his life the relationship between Astur and Laeden had been good.

Dagr, Erig, Fris, Ott, Torben, Ulfer, the commander - spies of King Arne, sent to search for the Host in Laeden.

Places

LAEDEN

A kingdom in a fictional world, where most of the characters come from and which is the background for the story. It somewhat resembles a country in the temperate regions of Europe. Its neighbours are Astur to the east, Vessar to the south and Therras to the west. The north border has mountains and it is not known what is beyond them.

Appleby - a village two days east of Keln.

Arburn - the river that crosses the capital city, Ardaena, from east to west.

Ardaena - the capital of Laeden, situated in the south-western quarter of the country.

Damerling - a town on the Eastern Road, close to the border with Astur. It is roughly three days south of Fiodhin and two days north of Llyne.

Daweldwig - a large, old forest on the hills between Keln and Rufburn. Inside Daweldwig is a Blessed Ground, a place where Edesil and the human world touch, which makes the forest look and feel like a different world. There is at least one road cutting through the forest, however it is not used very much, most probably because of the forest's strangeness.

Eastern Road - the main road running along the eastern border.

Fiodhin - a fortified city and one of the largest in Laeden, situated on the Eastern Road. The castle in Fiodhin is the headquarters for military actions on the eastern border, which is why there is a large Garrison inside the city walls. The forests around Fiodhin are old and bear some resemblance with Eina forests.

Keln - a town on one of the main southern roads, coming from Ardaena. It is surrounded by vineyards and orchards and it is famous for its wine and spirits. Outside the town there is a fort which was built to supply the army and for training purposes.

Kelund - the river crossing Keln from north to south. The waters of Kelund are brought to the wineries and distilleries through a network of canals.

Llyne - a fortified city on the Eastern Road, south of Damerling.

Longdam - a town north of Ulmaby.

Rufburn - a large village on the Eastern Road, a day south of Fiodhin.

Thorpe - a village on the road between Keln and Damerling.

Ulmaby - a medium sized village on one of the main southern roads, between the capital and the Eastern Road, two days east of Ardaena. Ulmaby is the largest village in his area and home to the local market every first Sunday of the month. To the north it is bordered by an elm forest, hence its name. It is the home village of Valan and his friends.

ASTUR

A kingdom in a fictional world and Laeden's eastern neighbour. Astur also

neighbours the southern borders of the Eina forest. Asturan language is quite different from Laedan, which could imply that Asturans and Laedans have different origins. The two kingdoms had some conflicts in the past, but during the last generations of kings the relations between them improved.

Maelifeld - a small town on Astur's northern border, close to Kiri's village.
Vres - the capital of Astur.

VESSAR

A kingdom in a fictional world and Laeden's friendly southern neighbour.

TERRAS

A kingdom in a fictional world and Laeden's friendly western neighbour.

FARGOS

A kingdom in a fictional world and Astur's southern neighbour.