

# DARKBURN

BOOK 3

## THE GATES OF KELVHA

TAYIN MACHRIE

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### The Gates of Kelvha

#### *Chapter 1*

For a long time the only witnesses to the procession had been the foxgloves standing sentry along the country roads. Now, as the line of Riders drew closer to the city, a few villagers emerged from huddled houses to look at them with wary curiosity. One or two women bobbed a curtsey. Huldarion knew his scars were being stared at and commented on; he would have to get used to that. Although he had been in Kelvha several times before, it had been under another, less conspicuous guise, and not at the head of an army.

The rustic walls and flowers became a formal double row of linden trees: they bordered a wide, straight avenue so bright and luminous with spring that the Riders began to smile, and even to joke light-heartedly, forgetting all battles for a time. Huldarion allowed the laughter until they rode up to the gates of Inner Kelvha. Plain, functional gates, these, used mainly to check the goods that were carried in by the constant stream of traders. They were not so massive nor so decorative as the next set of gates would be.

Here he turned and held up his hand; and pair by pair, all down the long line, the Riders of the Vonn fell quiet and wiped the pleasure from their faces.

Huldarion nodded. Although he didn't begrudge them any of the laughter, it would not do just now. As the gates swung open he beheld the new line of sentinels awaiting them: neither flowers nor trees this time, but a large company of cavalry, sitting upright and motionless on their horses until, as one, they saluted with their swords. The co-ordination was impressive. Then, without a single word, a troop of ten took up a place in front of the Riders. More Kelvhan cavalry closed in on either side, as stiff and formal as if on parade.

It made him uncomfortable. Too much ceremony, too soon. Or were they guarding Inner Kelvha from some sudden rampage on the Riders' part? There was not much here to guard: only a few straggling rows of cottages, little different to the ones they had already passed – except that no-one ventured out of them to stare. No inhabitants were visible once they were through the gates. Had everyone been told to stay indoors?

He wanted to discuss it, but did not like to speak to either of his nearest counsellors: neither Thoronal on his left side, nor Solon on his right. In this kingdom it was important to appear aloof. With some relief he saw the Kelvhan commander, Rhadlun, ride towards him.

"My Lord Huldarion! Welcome to Kelvha. We shall escort you to the castle where the High Prince eagerly awaits your coming."

"Thank you. I trust Prince Faldron had an uneventful journey home from the battlefield?"

"He came home restless for more action, bless the boy," Rhadlun said indulgently, "and immediately wanted to be out again hunting stonemen, but sadly for him there are none left within a hundred miles. He's calming down now."

As his horse fell into step alongside Huldarion's, Rhadlun began to chat with a casualness that gave Huldarion as much unease as the silence of the soldiers had earlier. Not enough ceremony, now. Although Huldarion was a widely-travelled man, he felt the insufficiency of his understanding of aristocratic Kelvhan manners. Tiburé, the most knowledgeable Rider to ask about such things, was well back in the line with all the other women. While he had promised that he would not hide away the women of the Vonn, they needed to remain unobtrusive.

He tried to match Rhadlun's casual tone whilst saying nothing of any moment. "You reached the city more speedily than we did, then," he commented.

"Yes, our army made swift progress. Our companion, however, took a little longer."

"Companion?"

"The darkburn," Rhadlun said with a blend of satisfaction and contempt. "A dreadful, stinking thing, worse than a peasant in a pigsty."

"But considerably more dangerous."

"Oh, we'll take good care of it, don't worry."

"Where will you keep it?"

"Safe," said Rhadlun in a tone of finality: by which Huldarion understood that the captive darkburn was no longer to be considered as any of his concern. He wished that he didn't have to think about it; or, since he did, that the idea of the darkburn did not fill him with such dread. Nausea. Hatred. And fear: a fear which he had never showed, but which he knew that he would always feel. It was burned into him.

It's not surprising, he told himself. It is permitted. When you've lost your entire family to a darkburn, and half your skin into the bargain, you are allowed to feel a little fear. He visualised the darkburn huddled in the corner of its iron cage, a blur of heat and darkness, never properly seen and even less well understood. An instrument of death: its aura of despair and dread contaminated all the area around it. He hoped that Rhadlun's idea of *safe* was strong enough.

In any case there was nothing he could do about it now. So he turned the conversation to the land and buildings that they passed: the small, fenced fields greening with young shoots of wheat and barley, the untidy rows of terraced cottages latticed crookedly with bean-poles. He imagined that in the summer they would be entirely smothered by their beans.

*People* lived here, Rhadlun told him, using the Kelvhan word that denoted people of the lowest class. There were three other Kelvhan words for *people*, of increasing rank, to culminate in Rhadlun's own. Some of these lowest citizens were now visible; they were working in the fields, and paused in their tasks, straightening up to watch the Riders pass. When two of the Kelvhan troops turned their horses towards them, immediately the workers bent to their hoes again.

"The land is productive," Rhadlun said complacently. "How is the land around your latest base at Thield?"

"Middling farmland," Huldarion replied. His tented town of Thield had just removed itself and re-camped in Outer Kelvha, some way east. He preferred not to discuss its exact location and in response to Rhadlun's unsubtle probing he murmured non-committal nothings.

All the time, as if to say *I am not Thield, I am far greater*, the wall of Kelvha City was approaching them: an imposing wall, which grew ever more imposing by the minute. Only the tallest castle towers were visible above its ramparts. Their narrow windows seemed to watch the Vonn's approach.

Another two miles closer, and the wall loomed high above them, its heavy grey buttresses a signifier of the wealth and power that lay within. Power to which I must ally myself, Huldarion thought – somewhat resignedly – to have any chance of regaining my own birthright and my kingdom of Caervonn.

He admired Kelvha's skill at organisation and respected its army. But was it really wise to bind himself to a country so much larger than his own? Well, wise or not, it was necessary.

"We shall enter by the East Gate," Rhadlun announced, as the procession turned to ride around that lofty unforgiving wall. Huldarion knew why: the East Gate was the grandest of the four city gates. Although they were approaching from the north, the north gate was an unimpressive affair and the northern quarter the poorest and most dilapidated sector of the city. Rhadlun would not take him through it.

He did not tell Rhadlun that he knew this. Instead he listened to the Kelvhan commander listing the various feasts and amusements that he would soon have to endure. The hidden undercurrent – which he was sure Rhadlun was aware of – was the choosing of Huldarion's bride.

Three meetings, Tiburé had said. Half an hour at most to choose one from a handful of young offerings. Stars help him. And stars help the unknown sacrificial bride who would have to cleave to his burnt and disfigured body.

At the eastern side of the city the broad gates were already being heaved open. They were reinforced with metal bands and studs in intricate heraldic curlicues; but the adornment could not disguise the strength beneath. A metaphor for Kelvha, he reflected.

He entered into the shadow between the walls without acknowledging the row of guards all standing to attention. Such discourtesy went against the grain with him; but, again, it was expected.

Once he was inside, out of the sun, the way before them was as full of spectators as it had earlier been empty. He thought these people had most likely been encouraged to turn out and cheer. Which they duly did.

However, the cheers, he felt, were for the Kelvhan cavalry in all their glittering gear and armour, far more imposing than that of the Riders of the Vonn; the stares were generally for him. He kept his face impassive – not difficult, for it had become the habit of the last twelve years – and heard murmurs in the crowd speculating about his identity. Although he understood the Kelvhan tongue he took care not to seem to hear.

They evidently thought he was some foreign warlord. Which he was, he supposed, though come here to forge an alliance, not wage war. The war would come later, when with Kelvha's aid he hoped to finally defeat the stonemen and reclaim his distant kingdom of Caervonn. But that was still a long way off in time as well as place.

Without staring back, he analysed the people. They looked neither ragged nor unhappy, and were probably of the next rank up from the farm labourers: tradesmen and lesser townsmen.

Behind them, down the winding streets, the tall, many-storeyed houses seemed to teeter dangerously, for their upper floors overhung the lower; but since they had stood thus for centuries they were unlikely to fall down upon the Riders now. The higher storeys were bright with heraldic banners dangling from lintels or from ropes slung across the streets; those streets themselves were clean, and mercifully unburnt. Kelvha had never known the fires that had ravaged first Caervonn and then, more recently, so many places in the north. Small but not insignificant places.

Yaret's account of her home town of Obandiro and its few survivors had moved him greatly. Did she wake every morning feeling the flames, as he did? But no, Huldarion reminded himself, Yaret had never felt the flames. She had not even seen them: had only seen the smoking aftermath. Still, that made a bond. He had tried to tell her, not that the grief and pain would pass, because they would not: but that they would become more bearable companions. His own grief and pain shadowed him every day. Yet the shadows were not always dark, and they served to remind him of his duties.

Yaret had nodded as if she already understood. He visualised her riding with the women back behind him, so many hundred miles from home – a home of burnt-out cottages and charcoaled corpses – yet getting on with her job. Whatever she thought her job was. Revenge? No, not just that.

He recalled his thoughts swiftly to the present, for there was a sudden small commotion to his left. Two people had run out of the crowd, dodging the Kelvhan horses to stand before him. Rhadlun, cursing underneath his breath, was fumbling for his sword when Parthenal rode up alongside them, his own sword drawn and pointing at the pair. A knight defending his chief: Parthenal always looked the part.

"Come no closer. What do you want?" demanded Parthenal, his voice ringing. Huldarion appreciated his comrade's swift reaction although neither of the pair in front of them looked like a threat. One man, one woman, both were unarmed: both oddities.

For the man stood in a twisted, slantwise way, some deformity of his spine making it impossible for him to stand upright. And while the woman stood straight enough her face was marred by a cleft lip. Although she spoke in Standard, her speech was not altogether clear.

"Borgun! We implore you, use your powers to make us whole."

"Borgun?" he repeated.

"Borgun, take pity on us!" beseeched the man, holding out his hands to Huldarion as if in prayer. "You understand our suffering, for it is your own. Alleviate it if you will!"

"What are you talking about?" said Parthenal, his sword still pointing at them.

"They are talking nonsense," said Commander Rhadlun savagely. "It's superstitious jabber. I'll have them removed."

And at his curt command a handful of the guards rode their horses at the pair. The woman was shoved back unceremoniously into the crowd, who did not seem too sympathetic to her: but the man squirmed between the stamping horses and escaped the soldiers' grasp. He threw himself on the ground in front of Huldarion.

"Borgun! Help us!" he implored.

"I know no Borgun," Huldarion said sternly. "Get up. I cannot help you."

"But you are he! Like you, we suffer, and we will be uplifted! You will uplift us, Borgun!"

At that point the man was indeed uplifted, by two of the Kelvhan soldiers who picked him up between them and carried him roughly away. The other guards rode at the murmuring crowd to drive them backwards. There was a last despairing yell of "*Borgun!*" before the man was hustled out of sight.

He looked at Rhadlun for an explanation.

The Kelvhan commander shrugged. "Superstitious idiots, as I said. It's just some old story that people like that have latched on to. If they were any lower-born they'd not have survived to complain about their state."

"Their state," said Huldarion, with only the faintest note of enquiry.

"Their deformities. No offence, my lord; even if you were not high-born I would never label your scars with such a loathsome word, for they are the marks of battle. Every Kelvhan warrior of note has battle scars. I do, myself," said Rhadlun, with affable condescension. "But those people are born deformed."

"They are unfortunate."

"On the contrary," said Rhadlun, "they are fortunate to be alive, and should not push their luck by making an exhibition of themselves in the streets."

Huldarion felt it best not to pursue the subject. He could make enquiries about Borgun later on. Right now he had more important things to think about.

*More important than people?* said an inner voice.

Ah, but they are not my people, he responded to himself. And this is not my land. And not my laws.

The crowd stood further back now, held away from them by some understood if unseen barrier. They rode on past new rows of sentinels: trees once again, in a formal line along the street, but so shaped and regimented that they stood to attention as rigidly as any soldier. He could not tell of what variety they were.

That is how they like their people too, he thought: conformity. Well, I can conform as necessary, for a while. We all can.

These sentry trees bore no fruit and made no rustle. Their motionless, translucent leaves might almost have been carved out of some green gemstone. At last the avenue ended as the Riders of the Vonn approached the inner wall, each of its stones more massive than a man.

Set within it was the carved and gilded barrier of the great Keep Gate. Beyond the gate, its presence looming over every thought, proud, strong and many-towered, was Kelvha Castle.

## *Chapter 2*

Parthenal looked around his chamber with a mixture of doubt and satisfaction. It was somewhat cell-like in its shape, with a single small, high window, yet its furnishings were luxurious to the point of absurdity. He didn't need heraldic emblems on his bedclothes, or a gilded lampstand shaped like a stag; while the mosaic that almost filled one wall – a hunting scene in shards of coloured glass – was particularly disconcerting. Not least because it must have taken months of work; and all for what? It was dazzling, but it wasn't beautiful.

On the other hand, the room was private. That in itself was a luxury which most of the Riders staying outside the castle would not share. And it was warm, although there was no fireplace: the warmth came through the floor, by some ingenious system of pipes, no doubt. Huldarion could probably explain it. There was a carved chest for his baggage, far larger than he needed. And when Parthenal tried them, the bed and chair were comfortable enough.

He lay on the low bed with legs crossed for a few moments, contemplating events so far. Only six men had accompanied Huldarion through the Keep Gate: the others were lodging in the city. So poor old Rothir had been left outside. His riding partner, having incurred Huldarion's displeasure, was not one of the chosen six. But Rothir had expressed no jealousy although he had never been inside Kelvha Castle.

Neither had Parthenal. Despite several stays in Kelvha in the past, this was his first time inside the castle walls. When they had entered, he had been careful to look straight ahead – with no unseemly display of curiosity – but gained a general impression of extremely solid stone walls and high towers, a series of large courtyards with a maze of passages leading off them; and servants. Servants everywhere. In the third courtyard, where they had finally dismounted, a well-behaved crowd had gathered to view them. Male only, no women.

He had allowed himself one glance across the craning heads, concealing his interest. They were a good-looking people, these Kelvhans, although clearly many of the servants were not from Kelvha but from further south. That blond, well-shaped man...

Parthenal had looked away. He would be ascetic here, as far as that particular pleasure was concerned, and would content himself with the other luxuries on offer. Beginning with a banquet this evening, and apparently another one tomorrow: after weeks on the march he was looking forward to some decent food.

There was a knock on the door. When he opened it, a servant stood there, a ewer in his hands.

"Hot water, sir."

"Thank you."

"I'll put in in your washroom." This young man was remarkably well-dressed for a servant, with velvet sleeves and bleached hair in a finely-plaited top knot that Parthenal assumed was fashionable here. Having placed the ewer in the small wash-chamber – another luxury – the man turned round and smiled.

"I am Jaul, sir, your equerry." By which Parthenal understood that this was not a servant at all, but a lesser member of the nobility, allocated to him as his squire. Not unattractive either. He nodded.

"The Arch-Lord Nerogun will receive your party in a half-hour," Jaul went on. "After the reception, there will be the banquet. If you wish to wash and change, I can take your travel clothes away for cleaning." He stood there as if expecting Parthenal to strip off on the spot.



"Thank you," said Parthenal. "I will put them outside the door." After a moment Jaul bowed and left.

He had few items of clothing; might have to buy some more. There would be opportunity enough for that, for Kelvha City was awash with markets, catering for all levels of society. Meanwhile, after washing, he donned the best of what he had and strapped on his sword-belt. This was by the orders of Huldarion.

"Every man is taller when he wears a sword," Huldarion had said to his six men. "It will remind them of who we are."

And Huldarion's word was law to him. More than law. Standing before the unlikely horses glittering on the mosaic wall, he unsheathed his sword and held it upright before him, closing his eyes for a moment as he silently swore fealty to his chief – his king, in all but actual position. That throne awaited, if they could be successful here. So he must play his part.

He kissed the sword before he sheathed it once again. Then he was ready.

When he left the room Jaul was a little way down the torch-lit passage, waiting for him. He seemed to nod appreciation of Parthenal's appearance before he led him through the maze of corridors and into the sudden blinding sunlight of yet another courtyard – a private one this time, or as private as it could be with a dozen narrow windows looking down on it from every side.

Here the others were assembling from various directions; Huldarion's six chosen Riders were quartered all over the castle rather than in one spot. Parthenal was not sure what the reason for that was, but was sure that there would be a reason. So that they could not confer too much, perhaps; at least, not without being noticed. He gave a warm greeting to Sashel, who had so recently lost his brother, and a less warm greeting to Thoronal, for he could feel his older cousin's disapproval of him even here. But Aretor was a more congenial companion – if not the brightest intellect – and Uld and Solon, the two elder counsellors, were reasonable enough.

Huldarion arrived and cast his eye over them. Parthenal hoped he saw no cause for dissatisfaction. But Huldarion smiled; a rare and difficult thing for him, because of the scars. Better than the sunshine, thought Parthenal, and no less necessary to me. He felt himself grow taller; never mind the sword, all he needed was approval in his leader's eyes.

As they strode across the courtyard into a great hall he was aware of being watched by many other eyes. As one of the tallest and most striking of the Riders, he knew he drew attention. A little dark for Kelvhan tastes but his warrior appearance made up for that.

And that was why he was here. For his looks. So behave, he thought, be lordly: keep your eyebrows aloofly raised, your eyes open and your mouth shut.

At the far end of the echoing hall they were received by Nerogun and the young Prince Faldron – a likeable enough lad, in Parthenal's view, if a bit shallow, but the years might put that right. The Post-Regent Nerogun, a solid and imperious man in his fifties, was by all accounts the one to watch. He had been in charge since the old king's death a dozen years ago and more, and would be the main ruler of the country for the next year – until Faldron became High King on turning twenty-one – and probably beyond that, if he could.

Compared to the lively youth of three weeks ago, this Faldron seemed dispirited. No, that was the wrong word, for he was still cheerful. He greeted the Riders gladly enough, but the youthful ardency he had shown on the battlefield beside the Outland Forts had gone. Prince Faldron here seemed subdued and passive.

Doesn't like being back home and confined, thought Parthenal, he wants to be out on a horse in his hunting-ground, not here making small talk under Nerogun's thumb.

But Nerogun gave the Prince an easy means of escape. "Let me take you round the castle to meet some of the officials, my Lord Huldarion," he said. "Your Highness, I expect you will not wish to accompany us?"

"No, I have seen quite a lot of the castle lately," Faldron answered, somewhat listlessly. Yet up at the Outland Forts he had been eager for Huldarion to visit Kelvha; had seemed keen to show him round his kingdom. Perhaps the realities of diplomacy bored him.

So with a bow to the High Prince they left him, and, led briskly by Nerogun, proceeded on their tour: which was not so much to meet officials, Parthenal was soon certain, as to be made aware of just how strong and extensive Kelvha Castle was. This was the flourish of an armed fist, if a friendly one.

The sentry towers, the armoury, the knights' hall, the guard-houses, the treasury and crown room were all displayed to them with an air of "What have you got to match *this*?" Even the dungeons were described, if not displayed, with pride; leaving Parthenal in no doubt that they were as solidly imposing as the rest. The décor, with all its gilt and jewel-bright paintings, mosaics, coats of arms and banners, could not hide the unyielding weight of stone beneath.

The officials, by contrast, were insignificant in their appearance, and designedly so. These were the men who did the actual jobs of Treasurer, Chief Herald, Keeper of the Crowns, and so on, while the titles belonged to noblemen whom Huldarion would meet later at the banquet. The noblemen had their own luxurious offices but none were present there: evidently the vast bulk of the work was delegated to these busy, careful, lower-ranking men, who bowed deferentially to Nerogun with varying degrees of anxiety.

Parthenal noted that anxiety. It could be seen in all these men except the Keeper of the Swords – or rather his deputy, the armourer: a strongly built, soldierly man who was almost swaggering in his demeanour as he showed off the rows of blades stacked in their cases and hanging on the walls of the large armoury. Perhaps he owed his confidence to the quality of the ironwork around him. The swords were very fine. Rothir would like this, thought Parthenal, and he opened his mouth for the first time.

"Do you have a forge within the castle?"

"Inside the north wall. Next to the bakery ovens," the man answered. "Though that darkburn you brought back could replace both functions all on its own, I think." He grinned at them in a way that Parthenal felt was over-familiar.

"Then don't think, Iajo," said Nerogun sharply. "You are not paid to think."

"M'lord." The man bowed, but sketchily, without any of the deference shown by the other officials.

Once they had left the armoury Huldarion said to the Post-Regent, "I gather that the presence of the darkburn, then, is generally known."

"Only to certain higher ranks within the castle," answered Nerogun, making Parthenal wonder about Iajo's exact status. "The creature itself is both well hidden and well guarded, naturally. This is the last of the major offices, my lord; there are of course still many others, like the stables, the falconry mews, the kitchens and the archives, all available for you to visit if you are interested." His tone implied that Huldarion would be above all such trivial things, although Parthenal himself felt quite interested in the first two, at least.

However, Huldarion said, "The archives may be useful to us. Amongst the wealth of learning that you no doubt store here, there may be information relating to the darkburns."

"Really? What sort of information would you hope to find?"

"The darkburns' history: where they might have come from, how they are made."

Nerogun looked sceptical. "That would be better learnt from examining the thing itself. And our archives, you understand, hold the long and extensive records of our own nation, but not of others."

"I understand that. Nonetheless..."

"If you wish." With a shrug Nerogun led them past the tallest tower to a long, low, many-windowed edifice that leaned against the castle's outer wall. Leaned, literally: despite its lack of height it was the only building that was not perfectly straight and upright. The roof bowed slightly underneath its ragged tiles.

"One of the oldest parts of the castle. Seven hundred years, I'm told, and looks it," said Nerogun with a faint air of contempt, as he led them through the creaking door and into a well-lit space, past desks where several men were industriously writing. Behind them were stacks of shelves laden with scrolls and volumes. The place smelt of dust and leather.

"Tradition, of course, must be maintained even if it is a little ramshackle... But the building serves its purpose. It's good enough, is it not?"

"It is most impressive," said Huldarion, and Parthenal supposed that this would be true if you took an interest in old documents. He had an idea that this place might be even bigger than the great library of Caervonn. Would that still be there? He had never cared much for its contents, yet the memory of that vast quiet space filled him with an ache of nostalgia.

"This reminds me of the library at Caervonn," said Huldarion, giving him a faint shock of affinity. So close, so unattainable... He ought to be used to it by now. Somehow he never was.

They had reached the middle of the long room, and Huldarion's last remark was aimed at a man who sat at a semi-circular desk, hunched and peering at some document which he was annotating with a quill. On being addressed he jumped up with a start, knocking over his pen-stand and sending the sheet fluttering to the floor. He half-stooped and straightened up twice, clearly not knowing whether to pick up the parchment or ignore it. Parthenal wanted to laugh. He bent and retrieved the sheet, handing it to the writer: a small, nervous, bumbling man, the sort, he thought, who had been born middle-aged.

"I'm told he has a fine mind," murmured Nerogun, "but it doesn't often show. Our archivist, Tamu: this is the Lord Huldarion of the Vonn."

"I'm not actually the – that is, I mean, that is to say, the office of Keeper of the Scrolls belongs to the Arch-Lord Welgun–"

"Yes, yes, we know, but I don't think we need trouble him at present. Your query, Lord Huldarion?"

"Have you heard of the creatures called darkburns?" asked Huldarion.

"I'm not sure if I – are they – should I have...?" His eyes darted to Nerogun in apprehension.

"If you haven't, for stars' sake just say so," expostulated the Post-Regent. He rolled his eyes.

"I, er, that is – no. I mean possibly. I think I may have heard something of them."

Patently Huldarion explained the nature of the darkburns and his interest in their genesis. The little archivist listened, blinking and bobbing his head like an anxious bird.

"Well, our scrolls are generally concerned with Kelvhan history..." – he blinked again, glancing up at Nerogun – "that is to say, with the glorious chronicles of our noble realm of Kelvha from the first High King Khal-Arethgun, who, who much appreciated, I must say, I am sure, the aid in battle of your own noble forebear King Dorial of Caervonn–"

"Yes, yes," said Nerogun.

"–in his many mighty victories," concluded Tamu in a breathless gabble.

Huldarion said gently, "Might there be contained within those chronicles anything that is of moment to us?"

"Well, I – I suppose it's possible, there are the Quests and Dialogues, let me see, and I believe in the reign of Garean some of the scrolls may perhaps have dealt with, ah, extraneous matters..." He made a move towards the shelves.

"Not now, for stars' sake," said Nerogun. "We have a banquet to go to."

"I am afraid we cannot linger. But if you should find anything, I would be very grateful if you would bring it to us without delay," said Huldarion. He nodded courteously to the little man and turned to go. Parthenal bent down again, to pick up the scattered quills and lay them on the desk. He smiled at the archivist, who stared back at him with something like shock.

"Come, Parthenal," said Huldarion, with faint amusement in his voice. Parthenal thought he might be the only one who could detect it. When they were out of the building, and as Nerogun was striding ahead, Huldarion murmured, "It will not do to smile at too many servants, let alone pick up their belongings for them."

"But we want that one on our side, I think," he murmured in return, looking at Nerogun's back. The Post-Regent, he felt, would not trouble to stir himself for the Vonn. But an anxious and despised little archivist just might.

"You know what I mean," said Huldarion, and Parthenal did. Well, there was no need for Huldarion to worry there. If he were tempted to smile at anybody in that way, there were plenty of tall and handsome Kelvhans around for him to choose from. Not least his own equerry, Jaul; he had sensed something in the young man that suggested he might be responsive.

But you could never be certain of such instincts. And you would be a fool to succumb to them in Kelvha.

### Chapter 3

"It was a very fine banquet," said Parthenal, rather smugly; "lavish barely covers it. Enough tender lamb to feed all Veron's wolves, and about thirty different sauces, in every flavour from cherry to lavender."

"I didn't care for that one," put in Sashel. "Perfumed sauce is very strange. They perfume some of the wine as well."

"Yes, I noticed you were sampling all the wines, to check."

"Well, Huldarion needs somebody to act as wine-taster," Sashel said. Yaret was glad to see him looking relatively cheerful, although she hoped he would not seek consolation for his brother's death in wine – perfumed or otherwise.

Sashel and Parthenal sat lounging on the unpadded chairs in the somewhat austere lodgings of the male Riders who had remained outside the castle walls. Yaret eyed them with affection. They looked very handsome; at their ease. She thought that they already carried a faint sense of Kelvhan superiority. That air of lofty privilege.

"Don't get too used to luxury, will you?" said Rothir, who perhaps felt the same. "It'll be a horrible shock when you return to normal."

"All the more reason to enjoy it now," said Parthenal, stretching out his long limbs.

"We had mutton stew last night," said Ikelder regretfully. "Or rather, turnip stew with the odd shred of mutton lurking at the bottom."

"But the cheese was good," said Yaret.

"The cheese could knock your head off at ten paces," said Rothir.

"Exactly."

"Well, turnips are probably better for you than thirty perfumed sauces," Sashel said. "I'll be as fat as a barrel after a week inside the castle." The half-dozen Riders present all laughed more appreciatively than the comment merited. They were still being very careful around Sashel.

"And the women?" asked Delgeb. "Were they there at the banquet – Huldarion's prospective brides?"

Yaret knew that this was the question everyone had wanted to ask. But Parthenal shook his head.

"No, no yet. That's the highlight of tomorrow's banquet, I believe. Last night the only women present were the nobles' wives. Huldarion has already memorised the names of all the lords and ladies. I don't know how he does it."

"He has a brain," said Rothir.

"I have one of those."

"But little-used. I don't suppose you found out any more about the mysterious Borgun?"

"There's nobody in the castle I can easily ask," said Parthenal. "You've got a better chance out here."

"Ah, but the same rules apply to us as to you," Delgeb pointed out. "And especially to us women even more than you men. We all have to behave ourselves, and be careful what we say to strangers."

"I'm doing all that," said Parthenal.

"Ha! I'm sure you are, polecat."

"What?" Parthenal sat up straighter and glared at Delgeb. "*Polecat*? Only Yaret is allowed to call me that."

"But Yaret is too polite to mention such matters. So I will."



"For stars' sake," said Parthenal, "I know, I know. I've already had the lecture from Huldarion about not giving anyone the eye. It's all very well for him. He'll get the lady of his choice tomorrow."

"We'll want all the details," Delgeb warned him.

"And then there'll be the consummation before the marriage even happens."

"We won't want details of *that*. Stars above, it doesn't have to be witnessed, does it?"

"No," said Rothir. "Though I wouldn't be surprised, in this place."

"They do like their formalities," said Yaret. "Going back to Borgun... Might your little archivist be a possible one to ask?"

"Little Tamu? He'd just blink and shuffle his papers anxiously," Parthenal replied. "No, I don't want to terrify him any more than we have already. You could ask at an inn or somewhere like that, where people will talk freely."

"But they won't talk to us," said Rothir. He sat with his freshly-polished sword across his knees: a characteristic pose, thought Yaret, and so forbidding that it was no surprise that people wouldn't talk to him. He might as well have *Beware of the Vonn* imprinted on his forehead.

"This afternoon Durba and I are planning to do a tour of Kelvha City," she said, "so if I get a chance I'll ask around."

"Well, Durba certainly won't be able to," said Parthenal. "Has she said anything yet?"

"Yes and no. I mean, that's what she's said. *Yes* and *no*. Otherwise, she's still stammering."

"It will take time," said Sashel, and everybody nodded gravely.

"She seems happier in your company than with us," commented Rothir to her.

"I'm not Vonn."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"She needn't be ashamed of suffering from battle shock with me," said Yaret. She knew that in fact Durba would be happier in Maeneb's company – if Maeneb could be persuaded to take a closer interest in her; but it was all Maeneb could do to endure being in close quarters with all the other women in their lodgings, which were even more basic than the men's. Maeneb said the voices of the city echoed round her mind with such a clamour that she could scarcely breathe, let alone think.

Yaret, on the other hand, was eager to be out amidst those voices, exploring the winding tunnel-like streets of Kelvha City. It was famed for its markets and for its sheer size.

She had one particular aim. An object that burnt constantly in the background of her mind: a formless, furious thing of heat and darkness. But she did not mention looking for the darkburn in this company, because Rothir would not approve.

So when he said, "You and Durba should be careful out there," she just replied, "Of course."

He was referring to their femaleness; but Yaret wasn't worried about that. She and Durba both wore male clothing, and although her own male mode was more effective than Durba's – both through long practice, and through her lack of anything that could be labelled prettiness – Durba was obviously Vonn and therefore untouchable.

So she was slightly put out when Ikelder said, "I'll come along with you, if you don't mind. I'd like to look around the city too."

"Good. You take care of them," said Rothir to Ikelder.

"I *have* been to Kelvha before," Yaret pointed out, a little surprised at Rothir's concern. He was not usually so peremptory.

"Only Outer Kelvha."

"But I speak the language."

"Like a country bumpkin," said Rothir. "Speak to a noble in that accent and they'll kick you down the road."

"Really?" She hadn't been aware of it. Perhaps Ikelder's presence would be helpful after all. It was not that she disliked Ikelder. On the contrary, she was rather taken with the contrast between the young man's ungainly awkwardness – all knees and elbows – and his notable skill in battle. Hesitant off the field, he was focused, calm and disciplined on it.

And he was kind to Durba, although the battle-shock she suffered from seemed to be unknown to him. In fact, Durba might even be the reason for his request to accompany them, she thought; although he must know that he'd be wasting his time there – so maybe simple kindness after all...

"All right. We'll meet outside our place in an hour," she said to him.

So an hour later, when she and Durba clattered down from the attic of their narrow lodging-house, Ikelder was already waiting outside the door. He greeted them with a diffident smile.

"I'm told the shops in the western quarter are the best," he told them. "Would you like to go there first?" Then he waited for Durba's answer without any of the slightly patronising patience that some of the Riders showed. Well, that Thoronal showed, at least.

Durba pulled a face.

"You're not keen on shopping?" asked Ikelder.

"M... m..."

"Maybe?" suggested Yaret. Durba nodded.

"The truth is," Ikelder said to both of them, "I need some clothes. Mine are all very much the worse for wear, and next to the Kelvhans I feel like I'm in rags." Durba nodded again, in agreement. "And I'm no good at bargaining." Durba shook her head.

Oh, wonderful, thought Yaret. My afternoon in Kelvha City is to be spent in haggling over undershirts. I need some myself. But I need to learn about the darkburn more.

She sighed inwardly and traipsed along with them through narrow streets whose upper storeys almost kissed each other overhead. There were even makeshift bridges across some of them, from roof to roof, precarious passages. The footpaths down below were so gloomy that she wondered how those living in the lower storeys fared. Not much light could get through those little many-paned windows. They'd need their lamps kept lit all day.

It was a fair distance to the market that Ikelder had suggested, and as they walked, gradually Yaret understood that Kelvha City was bigger than she'd thought: bigger even than its reputation had suggested to her. She had imagined that inside it might be equivalent to perhaps ten Obandiros packed together.

But her estimation had been way out. It was more like a hundred Obandiros – no, two hundred. The maze of streets was noisy and bewildering. Yaret soon realised that her idea of walking all the way around the city walls to see if she could find any signs of the darkburn could never have been the task of a single afternoon.

And even if she'd been alone with Durba, she would not have escaped notice. Their plain hairstyles and long green cloaks marked the other two as Vonn; and so did Ikelder's voice when he halted at a stall to speak, although his Kelvhan was certainly better than her own. On using some words that were unfamiliar, he explained to her that they were honorifics, which were expected when dealing with the different ranks of people. Her own Kelvhan, she thought in some dismay, must sound very rustic and uneducated in comparison.

Despite his assurance with the Kelvhan tongue, the three of them attracted stares. However, nobody troubled them: rather, they were treated with careful courtesy. As Ikelder had predicted, this was a well-off quarter, judging by the people they saw around them.

Plenty of fur linings and elaborate embroidery were on display; and that was just the men. The women were more discreet, cloaked and usually hooded so that their faces were half-hidden.

When they reached the clothes market, Yaret saw immediately that the quality of goods was high – and the prices even more so. She'd be lucky to afford a single plain shirt here. And most of them weren't plain.

"Do you have anything a little cheaper?" she asked the stall-holder in Kelvhan, keeping her voice in the lower register and letting loose her northern burr. "In Moreva the prices aren't this high."

"Moreva? Well, you're not used to decent stuff there, are you? We've got these," he said, carelessly pulling out a pile of shirts from underneath the counter. The linen was coarse and loosely woven. It would scratch. She fingered them, sighed and moved further away from her companions to inspect cloaks with a weaver's knowledgeable eye. Good wool: strong weave: strange colour choices. They liked things bright here. She supposed that the difficulty of dyeing cloth a clear red or blue – as opposed to a soft moss-green or oak-brown – must account for at least some of the eye-watering prices.

With amusement, she realised that the two old women next to her were busily discussing Durba and Ikelder.

"Those are Vonn, you know. The ones who've just arrived. They come from down south somewhere. Our Prince has helped them in their battles. Not too handsome, are they?"

"My Logun said that some of them are quite good-looking. He saw them ride into town, you know. Good horsemen, he told me. But their chieftain – he's quite a sight. Terribly scarred, all down one side of his face."

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know. It must be battle scars. It can't be a defect, because they say he'll marry the princess," said the older of the two women.

"Will he? What about the Lady Gaelera?" asked her friend, quite loudly.

"Ssh!" The old woman looked around in some alarm, as if the Lady Gaelera – whoever she was – might be just behind her.

The younger woman lowered her voice. "Well, she's long overdue to marry, and you'd think her father would have–"

"Be quiet," said the old woman, almost savagely.

Her neighbour was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Look! That one on the right. I thought there was something odd there. It's a woman, wearing a man's clothes, I'm sure of it." She was staring at Durba. "I heard the Vonn had female soldiers. How can they? So strange! So uncivilized!"

Yaret moved further away, and tried a little haggling over underclothes. She was unsuccessful. The shop-keeper stonewalled her, his face blank and uninterested until a beggar appeared at the far end of the stall. Then he snapped out,

"Hey, you! Get out of here! Go back to the northern quarter where you belong."

The beggar turned. He was an old man with an eye-patch, in filthy rags; his shaking hand held a cup with a few coins rattling in it. He touched his forehead in a vague gesture that might have been respectful had it not been so desultory.

"Any clothing you can't sell, anything ripped or soiled–" he began.

"Ripped or soiled! What sort of shop do you think I'm running here? The only thing that's ripped or soiled is you. Get out! Take yourself off to Northern Quarter and go to the bath-house."

"They've closed it," said the beggar. "Drains."

"Again? Well, that's no surprise – just look at the stinking scum who's using it. You clear off out of here," commanded the stall-owner. The beggar began to shamle away.

Yaret promptly abandoned her search for undergarments and hurried after him, wriggling through a crowd of Kelvhan gentlemen to reach him. She caught him up by a candle-stall.

"Excuse me," she called to him. The beggar flinched away as if expecting a kick, but she held out a coin; one of the few she had. He held his cup out for it doubtfully.

"Thank you, young maister."

"Can I just ask you something?"

He looked alarmed, but she persevered. All around was such a hubbub of chatter and bargaining that she was not likely to be overheard.

"Can you tell me anything about Borgun?" she asked him quietly.

At that, the beggar really did flinch. His one eye expressed such alarm that she suspected he would have fled on the spot if the crowds had let him. But she persisted.

"I ask because I heard a man speak of Borgun – he had a twisted back – and I wondered if you could tell me anything about him."

The old man put a shaky hand to his patched eye. "Why would you need Borgun? You don't have anything wrong."

"Wrong? A disability, you mean?"

"Borgun is for the damaged. The crippled. The rejected." The man's voice was low, but there was some bitterness in it.

"I have this," she said, and pulled up the right leg of her breeches a little way. "My foot: it's wooden. Feel it if you like."

Although she did not expect him to, he reached down a hand to check, tapping on the wooden leg above the boot.

"Ah," he said, his one eye staring at her. "Well. That's different. I didn't realise. Borgun has his temple in the northern quarter, on Old Tanneries Street."

"Where's that? I don't know the city."

But even as she spoke Yaret became aware that the conversation was now starting to attract attention. The words might not be audible, but the very fact that she was talking at such length to a beggar was evidently strange enough for people to stop and look at her.

So she stepped back, and reaching in her pocket for another small coin – farewell, new undershirt – she handed it with a more lordly air to the beggar.

"There you are," she said. "Now take yourself off. And find a bath-house that's still open."

"The other bath-houses won't let me in," he muttered, turning to shuffle away.

A second later he was sprawling on the ground. The coins rattled out of his cup and rolled around the stalls.

"Dear me," said the man who had tripped him; and whose elegantly clad leg was still stuck out. "Look where you're going, can't you?" He made no move to either help the beggar up or to pick up his coins. Neither did anyone else.

So Yaret did both, although the beggar did not appreciate her attentions: as soon as he was on his feet, he shook her off, snatched the cup from her hand and began to shamle away.

The man who had tripped the beggar now ignored him. Instead, he stared at Yaret.

"You're the peg-leg archer," he said, his eyes narrowing.

She looked at him, expressionless. Kelvhan aristocracy, unfamiliar; fine gear, blue satin breeches, gold brooch on his cloak, sword and heavily jewelled dagger. If he knew her nickname, he must be one of the nobles who had fought in the Kelvhan cavalry alongside the

Vonn up in the north. His dark eyebrows did not match his bleached and curled hair. She thought she might have seen him once before: where had it been?

Then she knew. He had been standing just behind Prince Faldron, when she had appealed to him on behalf of the Iobens.

It seemed that the man recalled her for a different reason. "You're the one who rode with all the wolves," he added. "That was quite a trick." He did not sound admiring; quite the contrary.

She gave him the faintest nod of acknowledgement.

"And you're female." The man smiled. "Yet you're not even of the Vonn. You're a country sheep. How do you get away with it?"

Yaret did not know how to answer. Luckily no answer seemed to be expected. He took off his feathered hat and bowed low and elaborately.

"My lady ewe," he said, "allow me to buy you some trinket. A ribbon, perhaps, for your delightful brown fleece, sorry, hair? A little bell for your neck? Some lace to add a note of femininity to your – how shall I say it – somewhat rustic woolly outfit?"

"None of those are necessary, thank you."

She wanted to walk away from him but the constant passage and pressure of people made it difficult. And now two other noblemen had grouped themselves alongside him, looking on in interest and some amusement. They were the ones she had pushed past to reach the beggar.

"What have you found, Dughin? A village boy?"

"A little one-legged female masquerading as a Vonnish archer," said the man with the eyebrows. Less of the *little*, thought Yaret. She stood quite still and silent, watching him. His companions watched him too, and she got the impression that there was some trepidation in their sideways glances.

"Vonnish?" said one of them more cautiously.

"She's not Vonnish," said Dughin. "What's your name, peg-leg?"

"Yaret!" The shout came from her left. It was Ikelder, shouldering his way through the crowd with Durba some way behind. "Thought we'd lost you," he said, with a grin. He looked at the group of men and bowed. "My lords."

Two of them bowed back; it was a few seconds before the one called Dughin did the same.

"I hope I find you well," Ikelder said in his formal Kelvhan. He looked more closely at Dughin, before putting out his hand. "I saw you on the battlefield," he said, "and I saw few others who fought as fiercely as you did."

After a second or two, unsmiling, Dughin shook his hand. "You were a Captain?"

"On the right flank."

"It was a good day's sport," said Dughin. He gave a bow just deep enough to be polite, and strolled away, with the other pair following in his wake.

"Well," said Yaret, as they disappeared into the crowd, "you came in the nick of time."

"Were they ungallant?"

"One way of putting it. I'm glad they didn't see Durba – mind you, they probably wouldn't have bothered her, because she's Vonn."

"She's hungry Vonn." He looked around at Durba, who nodded and patted her stomach. "Shall we hunt out somewhere to have a snack?"

There were many eating-places surrounding the market square, but all of those looked too busy for their liking. Yaret had already had enough of being stared at, and she guessed that Durba too would prefer some privacy.



However, on exploring down one of the quieter winding side-streets they discovered a whole row of pastry shops; so they sat outside one of these with an assortment of the most interesting pastries. Yaret's favourite held a mixture of spiced custard with chopped sweet vegetables. It tasted strange, but also strangely pleasant.

"I'll get as fat as Sashel," said Ikelder. "My new shirt won't fit."

"I don't think either you or Sashel need worry too much about that. Ikelder: that man, Dughin. You'd obviously come across him in the battle?"

"Briefly. But memorably. A very efficient warrior. Very..." Ikelder sighed. "Brutal. I saw him eagle a stoneman."

"Eagle?"

Ikelder hesitated. "Well. Let's just say he hacked the stoneman's ribs apart."

Yaret reflected on this. "Was it necessary?"

"Not really, no."

"Dreadful things can happen on a battlefield," she said.

"Yes. I have done some of them. But that was one of the more dreadful acts that I have seen."

She looked at Ikelder: he was not a man to flinch from danger or bloodshed. It must have been particularly bad. "Who is Dughin? Do you know?"

"I know he's very high ranking. His father is apparently the Keeper of the Swords, in Kelvha Castle. One of the noblest families."

"It's just as well I didn't slap him, then."

Ikelder nodded. "That would not have been a good idea," he said. Then he glanced sidelong at Durba, who was looking suddenly frozen at the talk of battle. Yaret quickly switched to a less traumatic subject.

"You probably didn't see the beggar," she said, and told them about her encounter with the ragged one-eyed man: how she had shown him her wooden leg, and what he had said about Borgun.

"There's a temple?" asked Ikelder. "So is this Borgun a priest, or a deity to be worshipped, then?"

"I aim to go to the temple and find out. If Huldarion is associated with Borgun in people's minds, it would be useful to know why."

"B... b... b..."

Yaret looked compassionately at Durba. "Yes, but I don't think a temple can be all that dangerous."

"Trying to find it could be, though," Ikelder warned her. "Old Tanneries Street, you said?"

"In the northern quarter. I thought of going there once we've finished shopping." She had already considered combining her search for the temple with her hunt for any sign of the hidden darkburn.

Ikelder shook his head, however. "I can't accompany you that far today. Huldarion has called the Riders to a meeting later on: that doesn't give us enough time to find this temple."

"I can go on my own."

"But it would be starting to get dark by the time you headed back."

"Does that matter?" asked Yaret.

He pulled a face. "Well, yes, it does. The northern quarter is the oldest and the poorest area of the city. If you must go, I don't suppose that I can stop you, but you shouldn't be wandering round there alone – and certainly not at dusk."

"So what are you doing tomorrow?"

"Unfortunately," said Ikelder, "we've all been invited to a ceremonial joust. That's what the meeting this evening is about. By *we* I mean all the male Vonn, naturally. I don't think our hosts know what to do about the females. At any rate, they won't be involved." He scooped the last crumbs off his plate and ate them.

"Well, I could take a female with me tomorrow to the northern quarter, then. No offence, Durba, but one who can speak good Kelvhan. How about Shebel?"

"Better Delgeb," said Ikelder.

"I'd be scared to ask her," Yaret said.

"M... m... m..."

"You?"

Durba put her fingers to her mouth; then pointed to her chest and mimed an opening door.

"You mean, you have a disability, so they might let you in?" Ikelder asked. Durba nodded. "They might, at that," he went on thoughtfully. "But then you'd need a third person too."

"I know," replied Yaret reluctantly. Although she would much prefer to do her exploration on her own, she could see the sense in what Ikelder said. Delgeb was a strong and self-assured warrior, who would take no nonsense from anybody. Including Yaret herself.

And as for Durba... why did she want to go to the temple of Borgun?

An uneasy thought crossed Yaret's mind. Was it because Durba thought that in the temple she might find a cure for her muteness and her battle-shock? Did she even expect some supernatural power to greet them there?

Yaret sighed. She sincerely trusted not. This task was difficult enough, without such folly.

## Chapter 4

"The city is nothing like I'd expected," said Yaret disconsolately. She was sitting in the kitchen of the women's lodgings, perched cross-legged on the bench while she carefully sewed up a rent in her well-worn jerkin with swift, tiny stitches. Tiburé watched this tailoring with admiration, and managed to refrain from comparing it with the inferior work of Shildha's maidservants.

Weaver, tailor, archer, Rider... the woman was versatile, thought Tiburé; and she always seemed content. But Yaret's words just now sounded so uncharacteristically disheartened that Tiburé regarded her with some surprise.

"Why, what's wrong with it, country girl?"

"You just said it, Tiburé. I'm from the country. Small-town at best. This city is too big. Too loud. Too bright. Too much going on. Far too many people. Too confusing."

"Hah," grunted Maeneb. "Just like everywhere for me."

"In that case," Yaret told her, "you have my deepest sympathy. I must admit I find it all somewhat... overwhelming. And now I've got to go and look for this blessed temple of Borgun." She snipped her thread and began to mend a second tear.

"You haven't *got* to do anything," said Tiburé. "Except enjoy yourself, for a change." She immediately reflected that this might be a tactless remark to make to someone who had lost their entire home town to fire and had subsequently fought in several bloody battles; but then she gave a mental shrug. That was little different to what many of the Vonn had been through – and it was all the more reason for Yaret to enjoy herself. Life did not stop.

"Well, maybe I don't *need* to find the temple of Borgun, but I want to," Yaret said. "And I've promised Durba that I'll take her with me. And I've told Ikelder that I'll take a third. So I thought maybe Delgeb..."

"Delgeb? And you don't like too big, too noisy and too bright?" exclaimed Tiburé. "Don't take Delgeb. Take me instead."

"You?"

Tiburé spread out her hands and then smoothed down the creases of her heavy riding dress. "I'm an old lady and I'm respectable. Even if I don't look like one of the Vonn."

"You certainly don't at the moment," said Maeneb, eyeing the stiff crimson brocade skirt with some distaste.

Tiburé would have preferred Maeneb to question the first epithet – *old* – for she was only fifty-two, after all, and had meant it relatively. But she did look respectable, by Kelvhan standards, if something of a country cousin. A starched, well-off, old-fashioned cousin who would be allowed a little eccentricity as a tourist.

"I could do with an afternoon out of court circles," she told them. "I've been two months now in Kelvha City, when I'd have much preferred to be fighting in the north with you; and my word, am I tired of all the dressing-up and lordly nonsense that goes on here. My host and hostess will be at the castle joust this afternoon, but I have no desire to see grown men knocking each other off their horses. Alburé can go in my stead." She thought her daughter might enjoy it. And Sashel would be there, although he was probably the wrong twin as far as Alburé was concerned; she had been very quiet since Gordal's death in battle.

"Do you know your way around the northern quarter?" Yaret asked with obvious misgivings.

"Child, I've been coming to Kelvha for thirty years. I've stayed with my noble hosts every time, and stars, is it boring. I have to escape as often as I can."

Yaret folded up her sewing. "I'm no more a child than you are an old lady," she said. "Do you know where this temple of Borgun is?"

"Not exactly; but I know where Old Tanneries Street is. I'll come with you. Just let me get my horse. And you get yours."

"Horses? Really?"

"Really," she said firmly.

So in due course the three of them – Tiburé, Yaret and Durba – set off riding together to the northern quarter. Tiburé had her reasons for insisting that they ride. While the horses would barely travel any faster than pedestrians through those crowded streets, they would inspire respect, she told the other two; for only higher ranks and their servants were allowed to ride inside the city.

But she advised Yaret to mount her moth-eaten old nag Helba and lend her other horse to Durba. Poda was too conspicuously fine a horse for a common archer. Tiburé designated Yaret as her groom; that should ensure Helba's safety as well as Yaret's own, for the theft of nobles' horses was a capital offence. To beat a beggar or a whore to death, by contrast, might bring no more than a fine, provided the offence were committed by a lord. Such was the way of this world, and since Tiburé could not change it, she accepted it.

"You ride well side-saddle," Yaret commented as they progressed at a stately pace away from the lodging-house. "It doesn't look easy."

"It isn't. It twists your back. You ought to learn though, in case you ever end up in a skirt."

"I don't see that happening," said Yaret. "What about you, Durba? Can you ride side-saddle?"

Durba shook her head and grimaced. She still wore her Vonnish clothing, but had changed her hairstyle to something more masculine, and could pass as a bland-faced young man. This was intentional. For after riding uneventfully down a series of broad, prosperous roads, they found themselves starting to weave through narrower lanes where a young woman – even a Vonnish one – might attract unwanted attention. Here, the stream of passers-by wore no furs and lace, but drab, much-mended clothes, and wary looks.

"This northern section is the oldest part of Kelvha City," Tiburé informed the others. "It even predates the Castle – parts of it must date back eight hundred years."

"Which parts?" asked Yaret.

Tiburé shrugged. It was impossible to tell. The northern quarter's antiquity had left its legacy in the mazy layout of over-crowded streets rather than in any ornate architecture. Most of the buildings were of wood: cheaply built, they were prone to succumb to rot or fire, only to be rebuilt equally badly.

No fort or mansion marked the place where the first kings of Kelvha must once have sat enthroned before their tribesmen. Not even a memorial stone, thought Tiburé with disapproval. The Kelvhan royal family preferred to forget where it had started its magnificent career; for the northern quarter was a slum.

She steered the others past the odours of the meat-market, and to avoid the many taverns of the crowded lane popularly known as Beery Row, she then turned left towards the city wall.

"This city must measure about ten miles round," said Yaret ruefully.

"You can double that."

"Really? But then I'll never..."

"What?"

"Nothing." After a moment Yaret added, "I thought it might be possible to walk right round the wall and see the city that way."

"If you mean walk on top of the wall, you couldn't anyway," Tiburé advised her. "It's broad enough, but there are guard towers every half mile, where you'd be stopped. And if you mean you could walk round the inside of the wall – that's not much better. It has to incorporate all the outlets for the city sewers. You'd find many a stinking stream across your path."

"Don't they run them underground?"

"Not in the northern quarter," said Tiburé.

They continued to ride beneath the rickety upper storeys of faded houses: tall, thin and ramshackle, their paint peeling, their banners ragged where they were still aloft. Many heads turned to look at them; a few muted and not-so-muted comments were passed.

"Nice horse." That was in reference to Poda.

"They look foreign. Are they those Vonn?"

"One of them is." That would be Durba that they meant. Tiburé didn't think that Yaret and Durba were recognised as women by any of the onlookers. Yaret especially wore her male guise very well, she thought, hearing a street-sweeper curse her abundantly for letting her horse befoul his crossroads.

"Would you mind repeating that?" said Yaret courteously; at which he retreated, muttering, as he whisked his ancient broom across the cobbles. She turned to Tiburé. "I'm acquiring Kelvhan swear-words," she explained. Then her expression changed as she looked over Tiburé's shoulder.

"What is it?" Tiburé's hand was already at the knife-hilt hidden in her riding-dress; but Yaret just looked puzzled.

"It's Zan," she said. "Hey! Zan!"

"Who is Zan?" asked Tiburé, looking round.

"One of Veron's hunters. Only he's not really a hunter. He joined up with them after his village was burnt out. He was taken captive along with Arguril," said Yaret.

"Ah, that one. I remember Arguril telling me about him." A heavily bearded man had emerged from behind a fish-stall and was slowly walking up to them, his face a little sheepish.

Durba raised a hand to him in salute. Yaret did not.

"Zan," she said sternly, "were you following us?"

He rubbed at his head. "No, of course not! I just happened to be going the same way."

"Ever since Beery Row? You were following us," said Yaret. She didn't sound annoyed, merely intrigued. "Why? You could have just asked to accompany us. But I would have thought you'd be busy today with Veron and all his gang."

"Veron's at the big joust with the other Riders. The hunters aren't invited. They're mostly sleeping."

"At this time of day? Why, what have they been doing? Out gallivanting all night?"

Zan didn't answer that. Instead he rubbed at his head again and said, "I just came here to do some shopping."

"For fish?"

"What?"

"You were hiding behind a fish stall just now."

"I wasn't hiding! I was looking around. Then I happened to see you and I... I didn't want to disturb you." He looked at Tiburé. A solemn, earnest man, she judged, not good at lying. Not normally devious, then.

"Would you like to come along with us?" she asked.

"No, no, that's all right," said Zan. "Where are you going?"



"Old Tanneries Street, third on the left from here. We'll see you there," said Tiburé. She nodded to him and began to move on. Standing undecided and open-mouthed, he watched them ride away.

Tiburé looked across at Yaret. "So you have two followers," she said lightly. "One of them literal. Both of them figurative."

"What do you mean?"

"Ikelder, and that man."

"Followers? If you mean that – no, that's ridiculous," said Yaret, visibly taken aback. "Ikelder is a friend, certainly, but that's all. And Zan... I think he's just lonely. His situation is similar to mine."

"Followers," said Tiburé firmly, with some amusement. She did not understand why Yaret would think it so impossible. A wooden leg would make a few men think twice, and Yaret wasn't conventionally feminine, which in Tiburé's eyes was all to the good; in fact, she wasn't conventional in many ways. But she had something about her. Quite a lot about her. Tiburé was fairly certain that Ikelder wasn't the only Rider of the Vonn who was interested.

Ah me, she reflected, maybe I'm just remembering my own youth, before I married Solon. And also some time after. Am I jealous? She considered this before deciding that she was not. Even if she could shed twenty-five years, she would prefer not to do so.

"Here we are. Old Tanneries Street," she said.

It was a busy thoroughfare; they had to pick their way past carts and delivery wagons. There was a delicious smell emanating from a bakery and a less delicious one wafting from a brewhouse. Some of the people here didn't smell too good either, Tiburé realised, as she eyed the beggars who sat hunched against shop-fronts and the ragged women hurrying past with covered heads and empty baskets.

Tiburé reached down from her horse to stop one of these with a hand on her shoulder. As the woman looked up, startled, she said,

"The temple of Borgun. Where is it? I have a mind to visit it."

"You, my lady?" The woman's surprise was evident.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Well – it's just that ladies don't generally..."

"I see," said Tiburé drily. Wealth was unlikely to be a bar to entering the temple; but femaleness very likely was. She should have expected it, really, and was annoyed with herself. "But you know where this temple is? Lead us there and I'll give you a drib." She held up the small coin.

Then, since she was aware that half the street now seemed to be watching them, she said in further explanation, and in a strong, clear voice, "I have a groom who is a cripple. I was told the temple is the place for him to go."

"I don't like to put you to all this trouble, ma'am," said Yaret in a thick northern burr.

"Nonsense. How can you see to my horses properly with that limp? The herbs haven't worked, and that spell I bought from the medicine man in Havvich wasn't worth the money. What an imposter."

"Yes, ma'am. I appreciate this."

It seemed to satisfy the listeners; Tiburé saw one man who was lounging against the wall shake his head and tap his forehead, making his companion laugh. Well, that was fine. A superstitious old lady with more money than sense: that was her role here.

Their guide led them further down the road and stopped outside a tall, drab building – this one a rare stone edifice wedged in between dilapidated wooden houses. It bore no sign,

and no banners. This part of the street smelt even worse than the average, probably thanks to all the beggars milling around. Tiburé handed over the dreb with a flourish.

"Thank you, my good woman. Where does my groom go in?"

"That blue door there, ma'am. I believe there will be a priest inside."

"Very good. Well, my lad, you heard her. In you go." This was to Yaret, who dismounted and bowed. "And you... er?" This was to Durba, who was more of a problem; Tiburé had not decided who exactly Durba might be.

"The young gentleman wishes to enter with me, I believe, ma'am," said Yaret evenly. "Is that not so, sir?" And she added a little sign language as if Durba were not only dumb but also deaf. Durba nodded vigorously and mimed assent.

"Very well. I will wait," said Tiburé. Yaret hobbled over and knocked at the door, which had once been covered in blue paint, now flaking badly. It showed no sign of what might lie inside. After a few long seconds the door opened into darkness. Yaret glanced at Durba and then led the way in, with a pronounced limp.

As they disappeared from sight Tiburé wondered if she were altogether wise to wait here, on her own, in such a neighbourhood. There was a pair of men lurking in a doorway who had a definitely shifty look. Although she did not doubt her ability to look after herself, it would be annoying to have to use her knife. And if she needed to draw her sword – its scabbard currently concealed by her long skirts – that would draw attention to herself in a most undesirable way.

So it was with some relief that, on glancing around loftily, she noticed someone else lurking, at the far end of the street.

"Zan! Over here!" She waved and beckoned imperiously. As Zan approached, the shifty pair eased themselves out of their doorway and disappeared further down the road.

"You found the place, I see," she said to Zan, who bowed.

"I wasn't following you, though," he said.

"Yes, you were, and quite rightly. I expect your master told you to keep an eye on me in these star-forsaken streets, didn't he?"

Zan looked faintly baffled until she fixed him with a frown, when he had the presence of mind to say, "Erm, yes."

"Well, you can come with me now. Take those horses. We'll find somewhere more wholesome to wait." As she nudged her horse into a walk, Zan obediently took the reins of the other two and followed alongside.

"You know Arguril, I believe," she said.

"Yes!" His face came alive. "We were held as captives together, after we were taken by the stonemen."

"He's a brave young man." In the past she would have said impulsive, even foolhardy – but maybe events of the last six months had modified those traits.

"When we were chained together, he tried to cheer me, to keep my courage up," said Zan eagerly. "He told me that his friends would rescue him. I didn't know whether to believe him. But then one of them did." He described how a Rider had appeared suddenly at dawn and somehow released a darkburn from its cage; then, in the ensuing chaos at the stonemen's camp, had killed the guard and thrown Zan the keys to the prisoners' shackles before riding off with Arguril.

"I didn't have time to free them all," Zan finished, "but a dozen men escaped who would otherwise be dead."

"Who was the Rider?"

"His name is Rothir," said Zan with reverence. "I lately went to thank him."

"I'm sure he enjoyed that," said Tiburé drily.

"He seemed hardly happy to know of the many men he saved. He just frowned and shook his head as if in despair."

"Well, of course he did," she said. "He'll have been regretting not saving them all, ever since it happened. Let's go this way; it's quieter."

She turned back towards the city wall where the crowds were a little thinner. Shacks and fruit stalls leaned against the wall's mighty bulk: up on the top she saw a pair of guards parading. She marvelled, as always, at the evidence of Kelvha's manpower – both those who had built it and those who now patrolled it.

The place still smelt, though. Tiburé grimaced and continued to follow the wall clockwise, against the general flow of pedestrians and carts, laden with muddy vegetables, cloth, firewood and ironware. She craned her neck to look over their loads; and seeing a clearer section of the street ahead, she headed that way.

They crossed a fetid stream by means of a bridge. It was being repaired and was closed to carts, but there were almost no pedestrians on it. On the other side the street was all but empty. And as soon as she took her next breath she knew why.

"Dear stars," she said aloud. "That smell..."

"That's the bath-house," said a lone passing tradesman, removing the handkerchief clamped to his face. "They've closed it. Drains."

Tiburé nodded but did not answer. Drains?

She felt a sudden surge of fear; a heart-stopping, all too familiar dread. When she looked back at Zan, his stricken face told her that she was not wrong. They both recognised that feeling – and that smell. The ever-present stench of drains might provide sufficient camouflage to those who knew no better, but the deathly smell was unmistakable to anyone who had ever met its source.

Darkburn.

## Chapter 5

Yaret stood motionless inside the temple's entrance while her eyes became accustomed to the dark. After the continuous clatter and bustle of the city streets it felt remarkably still in here. The sudden quiet was welcome.

What right had Kelyha to such busy normality, she thought resentfully, when her own town lay in blackened ruins? There it was, the familiar jolt of grief and anger, worse than it had been at first; as if it was always new and shocking. Yaret wondered at that.

But then she laid Obandiro aside, as she had to several times a day – but always gently, always with the promise to pick it up again – and concentrated on the scene around her. Once her sight adjusted, she could see a long, high, narrow space inhabited by rows of benches, and at the front three statues, indistinct from where she stood. Scattered candles provided the only illumination. A single candle was held by the man in dark blue robes – presumably a priest – who had allowed her and Durba in.

But he let them go no further yet. Barring their way, he said in a low voice, "Why have you come to Borgun's house?"

"My leg," said Yaret. "Or lack of it." She rolled up her breeches and tapped the wooden right leg. She had not needed to feign the limp on entering; for while the discomfort of her leg was usually dull enough to be ignored, she only had to concentrate on the stump to set it throbbing painfully.

The man lowered his candle to inspect the leg, and then nodded before he turned to Durba.

"And you?"

"The young gentleman can't talk," Yaret explained. "He's one of the Riders of the Vonn who are visiting your city; since the battle in the north, he's become unable to speak." Next to her, Durba nodded and put her hands together in prayer.

"Visitors are welcome," said the priest, now speaking Standard. "But how did you hear of us?"

"I too am a visitor, from the north. Someone in the market place told me that perhaps Borgun could help us. I don't know anything more about Borgun than that. Can you explain what he can do for us? Do we need to make an offering?" As she asked the last question, Yaret wished that she had asked Tiburé for some money. She had very little herself.

However, the blue-robed man did not immediately demand a donation as she had expected. Instead he studied them both intently in the flickering light. She saw that he was quite young, for a priest; his long beard had misled her for a moment. But he looked no more than thirty, grave and earnest. After a moment he turned around.

"Come," he said, and beckoned: and then he led them down towards the statues. Down, literally – for the floor, which felt uneven, like packed earth, sloped at a disconcerting downward angle. The temple's walls – what Yaret could perceive of them – seemed to be built of such a hotch-potch of large mismatched stones that she hoped they wouldn't collapse while she was in here. She saw the shapes of four people sitting on the benches, each solitary. None of them looked up.

The priest stopped in front of the statues which stood in the shadowed space at the front. "Borgun," he said reverentially, his soft voice echoing, and bowed his head to them. Yaret and Durba did the same.

Yaret raised her head again to study the three statues. They were life-size, painted; carved in wood, she thought, not stone. The paint was cracked with age and in many places

had worn away to show the wood beneath, darkly polished as if through years of being touched by ardent worshippers.

"Which one is Borgun?" she asked. For each statue seemed to show a different person. To the left, a small child was held up in the arms of a man who wore a crown: to the right was a much older, stooped figure, with one arm wrapped in his cloak, and the other hand upraised to the sky. Between these two, the statue of a man stood upright, looking ahead, his arms by his sides – except that his left arm was partly missing. She could not tell if it was deliberate or the damage of age, for the statue's face appeared to be damaged too.

"He is all of them," the priest replied. "There, he is the infant. Borgun was the child of a noble house, born four centuries ago. When he was three years old his family attended a festival. The High King of Kelvha attended also, and favoured the child by playing with him, as is portrayed."

He paused. When he resumed speaking his voice shook slightly. "An assassin was concealed in the crowds, waiting for a chance to kill the High King. He thought he saw his moment, when the King laid down his weapons to pick up the child. The assassin attacked the High King with his sword, but the child bore the brunt of the blow. One side of Borgun's face was cut off, and part of his left arm."

Durba made a single noise of horror and disgust.

"Yes," said the priest. "Borgun was not expected to survive. But against the odds, he did. Along with much of his arm, he had lost an eye and an ear: yet his family cared for him diligently, and in time he grew to manhood." He indicated the central statue.

Yaret studied the worn, cracked wooden face. It was easy to see why Huldarion, with his burns to his face and his left side, might be associated with Borgun. Even though Huldarion had lost neither an eye nor a hand, the parallel was plain.

"Why is there a temple to him here?" she asked.

"Wait. Many years later, once Borgun had grown to manhood, he was walking one day in his courtyard when he beheld a vision. He witnessed a great shining sphere, like a golden sun, that fell from the sky and stopped before him, filling the courtyard with its light. This he saw with his eye that was gone. With his ear that was gone he heard the sphere sing, like the pure ringing of a bell. He put out his hand that was gone and touched the sphere. He was filled with its light. In that moment he understood the meaning of the sphere's song: he knew his mission and his purpose. He would seek out and save the damaged citizens of Kelvha."

"Commendable," said Yaret. She noticed that Durba, beside her, was listening enraptured, with her lips slightly parted.

"You think so?" said the priest, a little sadly. "You are not of Kelvha. Many in this land believe, even now, in these so-called enlightened days, that those born imperfect should be killed at birth."

"If no imperfect people were allowed to live," said Yaret wryly, "it would not leave many of us. What can Borgun do for us less than perfect people?"

"Contemplate upon your imperfections, and you may be told," the priest said. "For now, excuse me. You may remain here." There had been a low knocking at the door behind them, and he left them and went back to answer it.

"We had better contemplate," whispered Yaret to Durba, who immediately slid onto the nearest bench and closed her eyes. Yaret sat down next to her and contemplated her own affliction. Her missing foot was an impairment, certainly, but nothing like the loss of her home town. Obandiro... All those lives destroyed had made a deeper wound than any to her body.



There lies my lack, she thought. It is their lack of life. That emptiness. They may stand at my shoulders, but unseen, unheard, felt only by me. Or imagined only by me.

However, the dead who seemed at times to stand behind her shoulders were not noticeable here. This temple did not know of them nor they of it. So she stopped contemplating her own wounds and instead surveyed the statues. They gave her no information beyond what she had already learned from the priest; except that they had obviously been nurtured lovingly for many years.

Just like the infant Borgun. She felt pity for him – for the dreadful pain that poor, long-ago child would have felt. His family must have loved him well for him to survive and grow to manhood. It was fortunate that they were noble-born. She hoped the king had offered help.

And that impulse that Borgun must have felt, to find some reason for his pain, some purpose growing out of it: she sympathised with that. Perhaps his family's care had taught Borgun to offer care. That too she understood. The urge to make good out of evil, to replicate the love he had been shown.

Then there was that strange yearning impulse of others to make a god out of the injured man. Well. People in desperation would always look for hope where none was to be found, except in their own minds.

Do I believe in gods? she thought, staring past the statues into the gloom. When I fell from the cliff by the river Thore, and lay bruised and bleeding, was there a god there? I don't remember. I remember seeing the sky rush down to me. The stars, so close. Yet they did not rescue me. I was rescued, but not by a god. Unless Rothir is a god. It might be tempting to make him one. No, avoid that. Perhaps the Farwth is nearer to a god, with its power over green growing things and its long reach, its vast, deep knowledge of the earth.

She held out her mind to the Farwth now, visualising the great mass of trees so close-entangled that they might have been one tree; feeling for it as she had in Farwithiel, but sensing no response. Although the Farwth's reach was long, she was probably too far away. And there were probably not enough growing things in the city with which the Farwth could communicate.

In any case the Farwth would not claim to be a god. A better claim to such divinity might be laid down by Veron's wife, were she so to choose. Yaret gazed again at the statues, towards which the priest was now leading an old man who hobbled painfully towards the infant Borgun. Then he lay down, stiffly and awkwardly, upon the floor. Well. It takes some people that way.

But Veron's wife. The huntress. Maybe a goddess. She was worshipped, certainly; even by Veron. Yaret felt a sudden longing to see the huntress once again. To behold that wondrous, terrifying transformation from woman to great cat: the snow leopard on the mountain. To look into those ice-blue eyes. To witness her existence. Her name filled Yaret's mind.

A name that was not to be spoken; yet right now, here, without warning, it demanded to be said. A sudden huge insistent urgency roared through Yaret. She could not stop herself. Looking into the shadowed void beyond the statues, she heard herself breathe out the forbidden name.

*Unsaryun.*

And the void was filled. Something grew there, swift and huge and without form, without sound, nothing to see, yet it was there and leaping at her with its white rippling muscled power. The snow leopard. More. The moon. More. The tall silver figure striding down the hill...

Yaret slid helplessly from her seat onto her knees, one hand pressed to her face, one hand on the bench in front of her trying to steady herself, as she felt the power of the presence that swept past her and in its sweeping brushed her with an ice-cold gaze, with a breath as slow and chilly as a glacier, with a soft faint touch of fur against her cheek. An acknowledgement.

Then it was gone, and she was trembling. She could not get up but had to stay kneeling while she recovered her strength. Her mind was whirling.

The huntress, she thought. It was the huntress. What was she doing here? Did I call her? Was that me?

A temple is the place for her. But the huntress would not come merely because I called. Not unless the need were very great. Not even then. I felt her because she was already close. But why?

Veron... She must be here for Veron. She is here, in the city, because of him.

But Veron said she did not often leave the north. Her lands are there amidst the ice and mountains. So why has she come here? Perhaps Veron called her. Perhaps he needs her help.

Or perhaps the huntress sensed that he's in danger. Where is he now?

At the castle joust, with all the other Vonn...

She managed to get to her feet. Her legs felt weak. Durba had opened her eyes and was looking round at her in some surprise.

The priest came up to them. "You felt him," he said with an assurance that bordered on exultation.

Yaret, trying to speak, failed at the first attempt. At last she said, "I felt someone."

"I saw that. Borgun is merciful. Come." He beckoned her. Feeling almost unable to walk, she followed him on shaky legs down to the statues. The old man was still lying prostrate in front of the wooden infant in the arms of the king. It dawned on her that nobody had noticed the swift passage of the huntress except herself.

And maybe I imagined it, she thought. Except that I did not imagine it.

The priest stationed her in front of the third statue.

"Borgun still lives," he said, in a murmur, as if it were not for anyone else to hear. "The sun entered into him and on his death he gave back his light to the sun. This is what you see here: Borgun returning back his light. And that light may enter into those who have seen Borgun, so that they become as one with him themselves."

He paused and studied her intently in the candlelight.

"I believe that you have seen Borgun," he said.

"I saw nothing. I... felt something. I do not think it was the light from any sun." A moon, maybe, she thought.

He bowed his head. "It does not happen often. But when it does..."

"Has anyone in this city become as Borgun?"

"Not lately; except for one, a recent visitor, like yourself," the priest murmured. "He bears the marks of Borgun down his left hand side. I have seen him. He is a leader, full worthy of Borgun's great light."

"And if he were to receive that light?" she asked in some alarm. "What then? What would it mean?"

"Some who have felt that light have devoted themselves to good works amongst the afflicted."

Yaret felt a faint surge of relief at the answer. Good works were harmless, surely.

"They have offered solace to the poor," the priest went on. "They have paid for treatment."

"I see." That didn't sound too controversial. She trusted that an association with such compassion would not hurt Huldarion, even in this hierarchical society.

"And others have done more. They have fought for justice for our people."

"Fought? In what way?" The alarm returned.

His voice lowered yet further. She could barely hear him. "They have taken up arms against the rulers who despise us. Not successfully as yet, but one may come who will succeed."

The alarm returned with double force. Huldarion would not want any expectation of that sort to blight his prospects of an alliance here.

But it was possible that after all the priest did not mean Huldarion. She needed to check. So she asked,

"The visitor you saw – where was that? Who was he?"

"He was the leader of the people called the Vonn – the same people, I believe, as your young companion there. Are you of the Vonn?"

Yaret glanced round at Durba, still sitting on her bench. "No. I am merely a groom, from near Gostard in the north. So you saw this man as the Vonn entered the city?"

"Yes. And then a second time, that evening," the priest went on. "I saw him here."

"Here? Are you sure? The same man?"

"How could one mistake such a face? I was here, just in this spot, attending to my duties, when I looked up and saw him standing up there, by the door. He raised his hand to me in salutation. Then the candles flickered and guttered. I turned to relight one, and when I turned back, he had gone. But it was the man. I believe his name is Lord Huldarion."

Yaret was dumbfounded. Could Huldarion have been here, that first evening? She had assumed him to have been inside the castle. Her mind was racing. Could he have slipped out after the feasting? Why would he come here? Had he made inquiries and come to see the place? But would he take such a risk?

She assessed what she knew of Huldarion. Not enough. But no, he was a careful man. He would not take such a risk. Perhaps the priest's own longing had made him see Huldarion in another man's face.

"You did not speak to him?" she asked.

"No, I had no opportunity. But it was he."

"What time was this?"

"Late. Two full hours after sunset."

Although he sounded utterly convinced, Yaret was doubtful. How could he be so sure of who he'd seen, in guttering candlelight? His imagination had supplied the man's identity.

Or maybe somebody had sought to assume Huldarion's identity. Somebody taking advantage of that same candlelight: an imposter who had not lingered, in case the priest should come too close.

She felt sick. Not so much with the idea of such imposture, as with the responsibility that it now laid on her. What if the man came back, claiming to be Huldarion – or Borgun – and offering to take up arms against the rulers here? What could she do to prevent it?

But what if it had been Huldarion after all? The priest was eyeing her curiously, and she could not tell him with certainty that he had been mistaken.

She tried to think. "My companion over there, the young knight of the Vonn, is close to Lord Huldarion," she said. "They are related. Let me consult him for a moment." As she turned towards Durba an idea was forming in her mind.

Sitting down next to Durba, she spoke in an undertone.

"Do you think it possible that Huldarion visited this temple on the night we arrived, two hours after sunset?"

Durba's expression was bewildered. She shook her head uneasily.

"Somebody did, who looked like Huldarion – enough to make the priest think it was him. Tell me. Is there any code word amongst the Vonn? Any private word you use to signal to each other?"

Durba looked blank and slightly scared. It occurred to Yaret that if there were such a word, Durba would not be able to divulge it. It would have to stay as hidden as the Ulthared, the secret lore of her own people.

"Never mind," she said. "But now talk to me with your hands as if you're telling me something important."

Durba's hands began to move, fingers flickering, making shapes. It might have been some real language she was using – one that Yaret did not understand. But she pretended that she did. She watched and nodded, and then bowed before returning to the priest who stood there waiting.

"The young lord tells me that he does not know whether the man you saw was an imposter," she said gravely to him. "Huldarion, like every great leader, has his enemies. But if the man comes again, there is a secret word that you may ask him for. Only the true Huldarion will know it. I have been given permission to tell you this word on condition that you impart it to nobody else. Can you promise that?"

"I can," said the priest. "I swear on the lost eye of Borgun."

"Very well. The word is this." She had been running through various words in her head as she spoke, trying to think of one that would sound likely and yet not be guessable. Even as she put her mouth close to his ear she had not yet decided what the word would be.

Then she knew. "The sea," she murmured, and wondered where that had come from. She had never even seen the sea. But it was not far from Caervonn, apparently; so maybe that was why it came into her mind. Now she began to worry that it could be guessed. Such a simple word for such a massive thing. But it was too late. *The sea* would have to do.

She stepped back.

"I will remember," said the priest, "although I pray that the true Huldarion may visit us again, and soon."

"I shall make sure that your wish is conveyed to him," said Yaret. "Meanwhile, please be wary. We had better leave now."

"You will come back," the priest said with certainty. "Those whom Borgun has touched are called back here. I pray for healing for both you and the young knight of the Vonn."

"Thank you." She bowed to him, and went to collect Durba before leaving. The priest walked over to help up the old man who was now struggling to his feet, no sign of his lameness diminishing.

At the door she looked back. Here someone else had stood to show a scarred, burnt face.

And over there, behind the statues, she had felt that powerful, huge presence. The name of the huntress crept to the edges of her mind but she dared not say it.

Outside, it was far too bright. Tiburé, thankfully, was waiting for them. So was Zan: there was no time to wonder why. For Tiburé at once said,

"We found the darkburn. It's imprisoned in the disused bath-house underneath the walls, less than half a mile away. We didn't see the thing itself. But the place is locked and guarded, and you can feel it's there."

Yaret merely nodded. She had forgotten all about the darkburn for the moment.

Tiburé raised her eyebrows. "Don't you want to see where it's being kept?"

“Later. Right now I need to go straight back to the castle. You have to get a message to Huldarion for me – can you go inside the castle to do that?”

“I can. But they’ll all be at the tournament. Why the urgency?”

“I’ll explain as we ride back,” said Yaret, already limping towards the horses. “Let’s hurry, please. It’s not just the message for Huldarion – there’s another reason. I think that something might be happening at that tournament.”

“What do you mean?” Tiburé asked sharply.

“I don’t know.” Mounting Helba, Yaret gazed towards the looming castle walls, so imperious, so formidable. “But something dangerous,” she said. “Something dangerous to Veron.”

## Chapter 6

Rothir was not enjoying himself.

There was nothing wrong with the place. It was a fine enough tiltyard, set against the castle's western outer wall, with two high towers looming over it and surrounded by a sizeable sailing fleet's worth of waving flags. As well as the array of Kelvhan lords and ladies on the terraced seating opposite his own, there was a large audience of castle officials standing behind the encircling fence. Rothir got the impression that they were there to cheer; which they all did, frequently and loudly, as if on some secret signal.

Yet despite the spectacle and drama of the tournament – the colourful flags rippling in the breeze, the blaring trumpets, the proud ranks of immaculate Kelvhan horsemen arrayed in bright war-gear, the cheers of the watching dignitaries – it all felt false to him after the dreadful labour and true fear and blood of battle. Many of these Kelvhan knights had been on the battlefield in the north. He wondered that they could take any joy in this pretence of fighting after sampling the real, bloody, brutal thing.

Perhaps the pretence was the point. They could enjoy the skill and excitement of the fight without the danger or the blood. But it was not to Rothir's taste.

Casting a surreptitious glance to his left, he guessed that it was not much to Huldarion's taste either. Seated conspicuously on a raised platform between his chosen six Vonn and the Post-Regent and young Prince, Huldarion bore an air of inscrutable patience. While Prince Faldron cheered and clapped with boyish enthusiasm, and the Post-Regent Nerogun occasionally deigned to touch his palms together, Huldarion applauded every parried blow of a mace or toppling of a man from his horse with measured deliberation.

His mind was likely to be on other things. Rothir knew – well, everybody knew – that at the coming evening's banquet Huldarion was to have the first meeting with his prospective brides. To have to make such a decision so quickly, and above all, so publicly, seemed appalling to Rothir. But his chieftain would neither want nor need his pity.

On the other hand, Parthenal, sitting beside Huldarion, looked as happy as a duck in a millpond – a very tall, good-looking duck. Parthenal was keenly interested in the jousts, for the technical skills of war were bread-and-butter to him, and he didn't trouble himself about the rest. Rothir allowed himself a smile; it was good to see that his friend was enjoying himself, at least. And Sashel too looked less saddened and more animated than of late, so that was something.

As for himself, though, he'd rather be doing some more useful task than sitting here to watch man after man thundering across the tilting court until one or other of them tumbled off into the sawdust. He had to remind himself that this was being useful. As useful as he could be, at present. Say nothing and look noble. Just relax. Should be easy.

But it stopped being easy when the heralds sounded their trumpets, yet again; when the panting horses were led away, the tilt barrier dismantled, and the four stewards stepped forward into the middle of the arena with a selection of green-painted swords.

The green paint signified the weapons' bluntness. They would have been made of wood, had that not given them the wrong weight and balance: so they were not wood, but blunted iron. It was evidently time for the hand-to-hand contests on foot, which Rothir disliked even more than the jousting.

And he especially disliked the fact that the Vonn, as guests, were now invited to take part.

Was this good etiquette? Maybe it was, in Kelvha. Huldarion showed no surprise – though that in itself should be no surprise, for he never did – but rather, he and his men seemed to have been primed for this event. As the first Kelvhan combatant stepped forward, he turned to the three men on his right.

“Which of you would like the honour of this contest?” he asked in a clear voice, and immediately Aretor stood up.

“I beg that honour, sir,” he said.

“It is granted.”

Saluting him, Aretor walked down the steps to the arena. Well, at least he stood up eagerly, Rothir thought; and he wears the armour well. For as Aretor was helped into the ornate breastplate and arm-guards, he won a murmur of approval from the watching Kelvhan crowd. If the competition were decided by looks alone, then Aretor would win easily over his dour and wiry opponent. Unfortunately looks were irrelevant once they picked up their swords.

“I give Aretor five minutes before he goes down,” muttered Ikelder, who sat next to him, leaning forward intently with his elbows on his knees. Rothir was inclined to agree. As soon as the Kelvhan soldier took up the guard position it was obvious that this was a man who knew what he was about.

Aretor also knew what he was about: but he possessed neither the speed of thought nor the speed of movement of the other. He was inclined to lumber; and as he watched, Rothir found himself inwardly wincing.

“Lunge, man, lunge,” urged Ikelder next to him. “*Ouch.*” Aretor had taken a heavy blow to the breastplate which made him stagger.

He parried and fought on energetically, however, to general cries of encouragement; for the Kelvhans had the courtesy to cheer both sides. In the end Aretor lasted about six minutes before the other man deftly parried his blow with an upward sweep, which he turned into a flying stroke at Aretor’s neck. He stopped it, the sword quivering, before it touched the skin.

“Nice,” said Ikelder. “I like the look of him.”

“I’d employ him,” said Veron, on Ikelder’s other side: high praise indeed.

Aretor bowed to his victor and let his sword fall towards him hilt first, in the admittance of defeat. The arbiter raised his gilded staff on the Kelvhan side in sign of victory. There was more cheering from the crowd – first from the nobles, then from the lower ranks.

Rothir breathed a little easier. It was never pleasant to him to see men fight even in staged contests, because mistakes could so easily be made. A blunted sword was still a sword.

However, he knew that more contests would inevitably follow. Sure enough, another Kelvhan fighter stepped forward from the ranks, and this time it was Sashel who immediately rose to meet him. So the order must have been pre-arranged with Huldarion’s group. The older men would surely not fight – except perhaps Thoronal – meaning that Parthenal would most likely be up next. Rothir did not envy him; however, he suspected that Parthenal would relish the prospect, even though he professed to prefer real battle to this sort of make-believe combat. Rothir himself didn’t enjoy either, but at least battle had a point.

He eyed Sashel’s opponent with a practised eye: tall and strong, but... “He looks a little heavy on his feet,” he murmured to Ikelder.

“He’s sweating,” Ikelder responded. “He’ll make errors. Sashel should overcome him easily.”

"I hope so." Partly for Sashel's own sake, but also for the sake of all the Vonn. To lose one combat could be diplomatic. Lose two, and you began to lose face also. And although Rothir did not doubt Sashel's ability, he wasn't sure how strong his will to fight was since his brother Gordal's death.

As soon as the fight began, though, he relaxed. The Kelvhan warrior was nervous, he could tell, and as Sashel got in blow after blow across his guard Rothir even began to feel a little sorry for him. What would the penalty be for such a loss?

Well, the big Kelvhan would soon find out, because three minutes were more than enough for Sashel to not just defeat but even to disarm him. The man walked away, head bowed, to join the ranks of nobles, which the first man had not. So the first had been a professional, and the second a noble who fancied his own chances.

The third Kelvhan combatant who now came forward was also noble, and higher ranking, judging by the pair of servants and the paraphernalia that accompanied him. He looked livelier than the last man: he also looked familiar. Fierce eyes beneath eyebrows that were too dark for his hair. Rothir thought that he had seen him up at the Outland Forts.

"Ah," said Ikelder, in some dismay, "it's him. Dughin."

"What's wrong with him?" Veron queried.

"Nothing as far as courage goes. He's merciless. I trust that he won't cheat."

"He won't cheat," said Rothir, but he now became anxious for his friend as Parthenal rose from his seat and was helped by a careful equerry into the combat armour. He looked calm, unhurried, and with his height and build was very impressive in his full gear. Rothir heard another murmur of approval from the watchers. Each man chose a sword: Parthenal's was the longer, for he should have the advantage of a greater reach.

The advantage proved small. That extra inch was counter-balanced by the Kelvhan's unexpected ferocity. This was a man who fought with intent, as if every stroke from Parthenal were a personal affront: a man determined not to be defeated.

Parthenal had to work hard to parry Dughin's constant lunges, but work he did. He was swift and sure and focused. There was no let-up. The cheers grew muted as the seriousness of both combatants became evident. Their skills were well-matched.

Parry, thrust, parry, block, swipe... The other man was becoming a little wilder now; if his self-discipline went, that might benefit Parthenal. The swords clashed against each other repeatedly but never against armour.

"Good contest," said Ikelder; he was on edge.

Rothir did not answer. He was willing Parthenal on, although Parthenal was perfectly capable of doing this without anybody's will. So cool, so expert, with grace even in combat. What a man, he thought, what a fighter, as Parthenal parried and feinted and thrust all in one swift movement. The sword-point touched his opponent's chest.

"Hit!" said Ikelder.

But it served only to enrage Dughin, who threw his sword at Parthenal. In his surprise Parthenal did not manage to fully dodge it. The sword spun in the air and the hilt caught him on the side of the head.

"Hit!" shouted the Kelvhan.

Rothir was shocked. Was this allowed in Kelvha? Surely such a move could not be permitted to bring victory. He wanted to jump to his feet in protest. There was a rumbling in the crowd but he could not tell which way their opinion had gone.

Either way, once Dughin had thrown away his sword it had to mean the end of the contest. Parthenal bent to pick it up, but did not offer it back to him.



"I propose a draw," he said, managing to sound totally unflustered and even unbothered. The speed with which the arbiter agreed – raising his staff with both hands, horizontally – suggested to Rothir that the nobleman's move should not have been allowed and that a draw was welcome.

And in diplomatic terms a draw was a good outcome, provided there were no more contests to follow. Parthenal passed the sword to one of Dughin's squires; but when Dughin was offered it, he waved it away contemptuously as if the sword and not its wielder were at fault. After he had retreated, scowling, no other man stepped up to take his place. Parthenal mounted the steps to resume his seat: Rothir had to look hard to notice how carefully he was controlling his breathing, so as not to pant.

It had been well done. Rothir hoped that was the end of it, so that they could now disperse, and he could go back to his quarters for an uneventful evening – for, like most of the Riders, he was not invited to the feast and the presentation of potential brides. That honour was reserved for the chosen few within the castle.

But there was, it seemed, still more combat yet to come. The heralds had raised their trumpets again; and this time a cage was wheeled in by several men. His heart stopped momentarily.

Not the darkburn? he thought. No, surely they would not; and there was no warning heat, no fearful aura, no darkburn stench. There was a certain smell, however...

"What?" said Veron in displeasure – almost anger. As the cage was turned around, Rothir saw why.

Wolves. Three of them. Revolving in the narrow confines of the cage, snarling and snapping at any hand that came too close. Men walked around the tilting ground closing the metal gates at the foot of every stairway. Now Rothir understood the purpose of the fence that encircled the arena: it was not to keep the audience from reaching the combatants, but the other way around.

On the high dais Nerogun got to his feet, a heavy figure in his long embroidered robes. As he looked around, the murmuring crowd fell silent.

"This next affray we have arranged as a treat especially for one of your most noted Riders, my Lord Huldarion," Nerogun announced. Looking at Huldarion, Rothir was sure this came as an unwelcome surprise to him although there was no more than the tightening of a muscle in his cheek to show it.

"We call on the Rider known as Veron to show his expertise," the Arch-Regent continued, turning to face the seats where Rothir and the other Riders sat. "My lord Veron, your renown as a warrior and a hunter has become great since the battle in the north. We have here for you the weapons you prefer; for our troops are eager – nay, I may say avid – for a demonstration of your extraordinary talents."

"They can't do that!" muttered Ikelder.

Veron, saying under his breath, "They have," stood up and threw off his cloak. He ran down the steps, vaulted over the gate into the tilting ground, and walked across it to stare into the cage. Even without his wolfskin cloak he looked more hunter than Rider of the Vonn. Not a big man, but quick, decisive: everything done with swift consideration, but with no fear.

He turned to the keeper. "Where did you catch them?"

"In the western hills."

"Show me these weapons that you think I use."

A box was brought over, along with a selection of spears and swords. Veron waved the sword away, for he carried his own, as all the watching Riders did. He picked out three spears – seemingly at random – and looked more carefully at the weapon he had lifted from the box. It appeared to be a number of chained flying blades, similar to the ones he used in battle. Veron called the thing a morilan: a northern term, no doubt.

Now he inspected this morilan with some disdain. Although Rothir did not know Veron well, the man had an expressive face. And right now he was not afraid. But he was extremely, coldly angry.

Of course, thought Rothir, for him the hunt is sacred. It is not a spectator sport, but a way and means of life itself. Killing caged wolves should have no part in it.

None the less, Veron appeared ready to do what was required. Facing the cage, a spear in his right hand, the morilan in his left, he nodded to the keeper.

“This could be dangerous,” said Ikelder quietly. “In the wild they’d run away, but trapped here they may attack whoever they can reach. Would those gates keep them in?”

Possibly not, thought Rothir, but a line of men in full armour, carrying whips, had also arranged themselves around the perimeter. He hoped they would not prove necessary.

Indeed, as the metal door of the cage was dragged aside, the wolves showed no interest in charging the crowd behind their barriers. Their eyes were fixed upon the man who stood alone before them. One after another they stepped cautiously from the cage and paused in a group, facing Veron.

Rothir jumped – as did everyone around him. For there was a flash and a loud bang from the direction of the cage; a fire-cracker maybe, which spurred the wolves into sudden movement. Another flash and bang sent them running across the sawdust-littered floor. Veron did not move as they encircled him, even though he could surely only see two of them. The biggest was behind him, watching him.

And Veron smiled. That was a smile of love, thought Rothir, even as the morilan was whirled around Veron’s head and flew towards the nearest wolf. The animal was caught by the neck and forelegs, the bladed chains whipping rapidly around it: and while it struggled, its partner fell with a spear in the throat.

The biggest wolf, behind Veron, did not take its chance to pounce. Instead it retreated to the perimeter. There two men with whips beat it back into the centre where it ran to and fro, as if not knowing what to do. Veron barely glanced at it as he bent to the entangled wolf and killed it swiftly with his knife before unwinding the morilan’s chains. The second wolf, that had been speared, was already dead. The third – it was a female – put its head down as it stared at him.

Now he stood up, looked back at it, and smiled again. Picked up a second spear. Then he jerked his head up as if alarmed by something to his right: the nervous wolf did the same, glancing away for an instant.

In that instant the spear entered its chest. The wolf collapsed to the ground, its body heaving only for a few seconds before it lay still. It did not see death coming, Rothir thought. That was all Veron could do for it.

It had been very quick. The crowd was cheering – somewhat half-heartedly, as if the spectacle had disappointed them – but Veron neither raised his arms in triumph nor bowed. He walked over, went down on one knee and laid a hand briefly on the largest wolf – perhaps to check if it were truly dead, perhaps for some other reason. Then he nodded, stood up and turned to face Huldarion.

Salute him, Rothir thought, you have to salute him; and at last Veron did so.

That overbearing bull of a man Nerogun was on his feet again.

"A noble fight," he pronounced sonorously. "You make it look quite easy. No, do not return to your seat just yet, I beg you, Lord Veron. We have another treat in store. I thought the wolves might be no more than mice beneath your hand, and so it proved. Hardly worth your trouble. So we have hunted down and captured something that might whet your appetite for blood a little better."

The dead wolves were dragged away. The armoured men with whips retreated to stand behind the fence and gates. From the back of the arena another cage was pulled laboriously in by a dozen men.

This was a heavy cage, which snarled and rocked. There was a rush of indrawn gasps, sweeping through the crowd like a sharp breeze. As the cage was turned, Rothir too caught his breath.

"No," he said. It was a great cat. Striped. White and black, a thing made of midnight shadows, that rippled as it stalked around its cage. It was very large; bigger than the lions he had encountered now and then in the wild – more muscled than them, heavier, much more formidable.

It stopped its pacing to gaze out between the bars with pale golden eyes, unblinking and commanding. Rothir had heard of such creatures but had never seen one until now. It was an animal of extraordinary beauty as well as fearful power.

Veron stood and gazed back at the great cat, very still. There was a silence as eye met eye. Then he raised his hand and let the morilan fall to the ground, a clattering snake that formed a rapid coiling pile of metal. Turning his back on the midnight tiger's cage, he walked away.

"What's he planning?" said Ikelder.

"He can't do this," said Rothir in sudden realisation.

"He can. He has to," said Ikelder. "Imagine if that thing got out into the crowd!"

It could easily happen. Once it was released, the cat could leap those barriers in an instant, Rothir thought, and a few men with whips would not deter it long. Although two of the guards held a net it looked flimsy to his eyes. Did they not know how fast a great cat could move – or how powerful it was? How could they hope to hold back a tiger safely? Wizardry?

In growing misgiving he looked around the crowd for Leor, but the familiar red hair with its white streaks was nowhere to be seen. So not Leor. Maybe they were relying on Veron.

But now he was certain that Veron could not do this – or rather, would not. Veron had turned his back on the animal because of his wife. This great cat was too close, too similar to the shape-shifting huntress; it was her kin, and surely it was forbidden for Veron to kill it in this way, for entertainment.

Veron would refuse. And what then?

The cage was slowly opening with a dull creak of iron on iron, its gate being pulled aside on long chains. And Veron still stood with his back to it, facing Huldarion, holding no weapon in his hands. Once it was freed, the cat would most likely pounce and kill him. It would rip his throat out. And then it could go in any direction and kill whoever stood or sat in its way.

Rothir sensed that although he did not show it, Huldarion was stunned, as aghast as he was himself. This could be disastrous. A blood-bath.

Then Rothir was on his feet and running down the steps before he knew what he was going to do. He leapt the gate and raced across the tilting ground to stand beside Veron and face Huldarion.

"My lord Huldarion, I beg the honour of this fight," he said loudly, while part of his mind said *What?* How can you fight a tiger?

Be quiet: I will, I have to, or Veron will die, he answered himself. Now, say yes, say yes, say yes.

It seemed a long few seconds before Huldarion made any movement. He had no sooner nodded than Rothir whirled around to face the beast. The cage was still opening, the cat turning round behind the bars. The Kelvhan guards threw a bundle of spears towards him, in a clattering heap, and a metal breastplate. He let them lie. What use was a breastplate against this creature? No time to put it on in any case. He drew his sword, and then his knife.

The cage was half open now. Already the great cat would be able to push its way out. For now, it was watching him with those inhuman golden eyes, considering its first move.

I will probably die here, Rothir realised, at the teeth and claws of this majestic creature. So assured. Magnificent. Three times my weight: five times my power. I came to sit through a tedious tournament and here I am about to die. It's the same before battle. But in battle I'm prepared. Now I'm not. This is my end. And she doesn't know.

For some reason Yaret had leapt into his mind: what would she think when he got himself killed like this, without even warning her?

"Tell her I had to," he said to Veron.

Veron nodded. "Watch the feet," he said, and withdrew to the perimeter of the arena.

Rothir had no time to consider what he meant. The cage was fully open now; the crowd was gasping audibly, and all he could do was try to be ready. He kicked away the spears lying on the ground. Even if the tiger gave him long enough to reach and aim and hurl a spear, he had not the accuracy to kill it with one throw. He had killed two lions in the past, but with bow and arrows; and then had used his sword to finish one of them off.

This one will finish you off, he told himself bluntly. So die well. Die with honour.

But first, concentrate.

The tiger was sliding out of the cage now, moving entirely silently despite its size. More gasps went round the arena. Watch the feet, he thought, for that is where its weapons are. One mouth, but four armed feet. He stood with his wrists crossed, sword held in his right hand and his knife in the other.

It stalked around the arena's edge, always watching him. The crowd pulled away with another shuddering gust of gasps: but the animal ignored them. Its attention was all on Rothir. It began to lope towards him, and then, suddenly, to run.

The acceleration was astounding. As it sprang he threw himself to one side, flinging his sword arm out in a scything upstroke that caught the creature's outstretched foot. He thought the blade might have half-severed the limb but it did not slow the tiger down. Before he had regained his feet amidst the sawdust it had turned – so swift, so supple – and was running at him a second time.

When it leapt, he threw himself the other way, to the right, scything as before but with the knife. The blade caught its left front paw so that now both were dripping blood. The tiger twisted round, more quickly this time, and pounced again from closer to him.

Its swiftness meant that he did not throw himself far enough to the side: claws raked down his shoulder as he swiped his sword, trying to slice the creature's chest to force it away from him. He thought he had sliced only fur but when the cat recoiled he saw blood on the stripes.

Even so, Rothir knew he could not do this for much longer. It was getting closer to killing him with every attempt. He had no room, no time. Already it had twined round, as if gathering itself, and now it sprang again.

Those teeth – huge, close. He managed to jump aside, yet again, thrusting his sword towards its flank, and losing his grip on the hilt. The sword was lost somewhere on the floor. No way to pick it up. As the tiger squirmed after the blow he threw himself upon its back.

You could not ride a tiger like a horse. But try. All fur and muscle. Gripping the huge writhing body with his legs, he got one arm around its neck. He was in the only place where he could not be bitten. He tried to pull its head back, but it was too strong. The teeth were close. Claws raked his arm, but more weakly – that wounded paw – and then it threw itself onto the ground and rolled over onto its back, pinning him beneath it.

Its weight was crushing him. He could not breathe. Where was his sword? Unreachable. But he still had his knife in his left hand and with that he tried to cut the tiger's throat. It didn't seem to be working – nothing was happening except that he was pinned to the floor, being flattened by a ton of muscle and striped fur and a continuous long, husky snarling that rasped right through his head. He needed to breathe.

Moving the knife downward he slashed at the belly and seemed to feel the shock of pain in his own body. He felt himself become half-tiger, wild with the agony and the indignity of being ripped open, his strength being cut away, trying to both lose and destroy the burden laid on him.

The tiger rolled back onto its side, limbs stretching and contorting, and he lost his grip and slid off.

But now he could breathe. At once he was on his feet, panting and grasping for his sword as the animal also seemed to recover. It whirled round to attack again despite its dreadful wounds.

There was no chance to leap aside. He swept the sword with an upward stroke beneath its jaw and in the same instant fell, caught in its claws.

But its limbs lacked their former power. The swiftness clogged, and slowed. As the jaws came towards him he pushed at the sword; harder, do the job, it's almost done. And then the head fell back and the body fell over, pulsing, writhing, guts spilling from its abdomen where he had slashed it with the knife. Blood soaked into the sawdust. It tried to get up again and could not.

He staggered back a pace or two and waited. Not a good death. A bad death. Messy, bloody, painful, hateful. No way to speed it up without becoming prey to those long claws: even now it could still kill him. He wished he hadn't done it. But what else could he have done?

And he had paid, in his own blood. He didn't know how much was his and how much was the tiger's. All he could do was stand and watch it die.

It flailed a limb, and tried to raise its head, which fell back panting but more slowly now, more slowly. Then it stopped. At last the massive blood-soaked animal was still: as still as the audience around him.

With an effort Rothir walked over to the great body to check that it was fully dead, although he did not think he could have raised his sword to it again if he had needed to. But there was no need. As he knelt down beside it, a strange film seemed to cross the golden eyes.

Then there was a cheer: applause was swelling in the audience, becoming a delighted roar. He didn't want it. He looked up and saw Veron.

Veron was gazing, not at him, nor at the tiger, but with recognition – and with wonder, almost adoration – at something else a little way beyond the heavy body. Rothir turned to look. A thing that was not there. What was that? He had the feeling of some huge presence, some other eye. Some movement, close beside him: he turned back to the tiger's corpse, to check again.

The corpse lay still. But with the faintest breath and brush of fur, he felt the movement rake against his head. A claw of ice. A crescent shard of moon. It shut out all sound, and it froze his soul.

So this is death, he thought, after all, how quiet it is, how lonely. The world was turning grey and empty and he fell into the void.

## Chapter 7

Huldarion was on his feet in shock and alarm. Parthenal had already started up and was running down the stairway to the tilting-ground.

Huldarion turned to Uld. "Go with him," he said, for he must be seen to have ordered and approved this sudden movement. Uld immediately ran down the steps after Parthenal. Huldarion wanted to follow, but made himself wait.

I am being shaped already by these people, he thought; I must not allow that to continue beyond what is necessary. But what is necessary? Oh, Rothir, your death was not necessary. I will blame them for ever.

But Uld, kneeling down beside the two bodies – the long striped one and the human, beloved one – raised his arm with open fist: the battlefield sign for life. Rothir lived. Huldarion drew a long breath and did not care if the Kelvhan lords around him overheard this sign of his relief. Men began to hurry over with a stretcher. Veron squatted by the bodies, while Parthenal propped Rothir up with a tender arm around his shoulders.

"Your champion, Parthenal, seems very fond of his companion," said the Post-Regent who still sat next to him, apparently unmoved.

Huldarion glanced at him sharply. "As am I," he said. "I would be loath to lose such a valued warrior in this way."

"Naturally. That is the man who authorised the raising of the darkburn, is it not?"

"It is. A strong and loyal man."

Nerogun stroked his chin. "No doubt he wished to prove his strength and loyalty to you just now, by taking on this fight."

"I have no doubt he did." But Huldarion was not sure why Rothir had done it. He gathered his wits together, mastering his emotion. "I take it this celebration is now over? A most impressive display. I thank you for your hospitality." He bowed first to the High Prince, and then to Nerogun and the other dignitaries.

"It was good, wasn't it?" said Prince Faldron. "I thought the tiger was the best."

Huldarion felt his heart freeze in his chest. Evenly he replied, "It was indeed most striking, your Highness. I and my men would now like to withdraw for a while, to make ready for the feast this evening." I will not ask for permission, he thought in chilly anger, I will be my own master here. Only I am not. There is clearly only one master in Kelvha, and his name is Nerogun.

"Oh yes, the feast," said Faldron. "Yes, that should be very fine as well."

And this is the man who will be High King of Kelvha in less than a year, thought Huldarion as he swiftly descended the steps with the remainder of his retinue. Faldron is not malicious, as least. And hardly a fool. But he would be the better for a little more concern and empathy.

The crowds were still amassed, watching him as he crossed the tilting ground. Let them see his concern.

Rothir was lying on a stretcher now, unconscious and streaked in blood, breathing shallowly. Kneeling beside him, Huldarion laid a hand upon his brow and then his throat. His pulse seemed steady.

"I don't think he has any major wounds," said Uld. "Some gashes from its claws, but none life-threatening. I don't think he can have lost too much blood. He was probably stunned when the cat fell on him."

"Or inwardly crushed," said Huldarion, voicing his own fear.

"Shall we carry him to the castle doctor?" asked one of the stretcher-bearers.

"No. Take him to the Vonn's' quarters outside the castle," said Huldarion. He was averse to letting the castle doctors tend Rothir, excellent men though they might be. But after the appearance of the tiger – of which he was sure Veron had received no more warning than he had himself – he did not trust the goodwill of the Kelvhans. Perhaps all this was normal: a grand climax to their tournament. Perhaps not.

"I'll accompany him," said Uld.

"And I," said Parthenal, who looked uncommonly shocked and anxious for a man normally so self-assured.

Huldarion nodded and turned towards Veron. "What do you think? Will he recover?" He really wanted to ask something else: whether Veron had truly been about to refuse the fight when Rothir had run forward. But he could not ask that in front of the others, so he was glad when Veron said nothing but walked aside a few paces. He followed; and they spoke together quietly.

"I don't know," said Veron. "Rothir should recover. Probably. That was just a penalty. If she'd wanted to kill him she'd have done it."

"She."

"My wife."

"I did not see her," said Huldarion, taken aback.

"No. But she was here. Because of..." He indicated the tiger's corpse.

"Is that animal her kin?"

"Kin enough that I could not destroy it, not in the way the Kelvhans were demanding. She would have killed me if I had; or abandoned me." Veron spoke low and rapidly. "Killing me would have been preferable."

"But you did not ask for this contest. You had no choice in the matter."

"Yes, I had. Once I saw the cat, I chose to refuse it, even if it were to slay me: which it would have done. Either way I'd die. Better die by it than by the huntress. Rothir saw all that."

"I saw nothing," said Huldarion, baffled, because he was used to seeing more than most people.

"No. She didn't wish to be seen. But she was here."

"Where is she now?"

Veron simply looked at him. Then he said, "I told her Rothir had to do it. That's why he's still alive."

"Then I hope to the stars he stays alive," said Huldarion, and he turned back to the stretcher where Rothir still lay unconscious, breathing effortfully. As he watched his friend being carried off towards the Riders' quarters, his mind was as busy as a beehive.

Why the tiger? Why Veron? Did the Kelvhans mean for him to die? Did they know he would refuse? He had the feeling that some sort of trap had been laid.

But by whom? Surely Nerogun would not know about the huntress. The Kelvhan marshal, Shargun, who had been there on the battlefield, had no idea where the great snow leopard had come from. He had not seen its transformation from a woman. He did not know about the connection with Veron.

Even Huldarion himself had not known until lately who Veron's wife was. Who else would know – or care – enough to lay such a trap?

One person might, he thought, one person. But he is not here. How could he be here, the ignoble one? This is just coincidence, or simple mischief on Nerogun's part. Nerogun surely would not have let Veron die: or would he? To see Veron fall in such a combat would have



lowered our stock. Reduced our leverage. It might have affected which girls they will present to me this evening. Diminished the strength of our alliance.

This evening. The feast. The choice. So much to think about: too much. As they stepped outside the arena, following the stretcher, Huldarion paused, signalling his four remaining men to halt.

"It does not need all of us to accompany Rothir; Uld and Parthenal are enough," he said, although his emotions revolted. He ought to stay until he knew Rothir was safe. None the less he walked away from the stretcher, flanked by his counsellors, towards the west gate of the castle. But slowly. He wanted to regain his composure.

Tiburé was waiting for him by the gate, alone. She nodded curtly to her husband Solon, but it was plainly Huldarion whom she wished to see.

"Can I talk to you?" she said in her brusque way. "There are things you need to know."

"Is it urgent? There's a lot going on just now," he said. "A man is injured."

"Who? Is it Veron?"

"Veron?" He was surprised that rumour could have reached her so fast. "No. Veron is fine. But he could easily have been killed were it not for Rothir. Can this wait?"

"It's important," said Tiburé. "But not urgent."

"What's it about?"

"Two things," said Tiburé. "Firstly: we have found the darkburn, in the northern quarter. Secondly, we have found out something about Borgun and his temple, in the same part of the city."

"Very well. Both of those can wait until tomorrow. I will be occupied till then."

"Enjoy the feast," said Tiburé, and she retreated.

Enjoy the feast! Little hope of that, Huldarion thought, with his anxiety for Rothir and his bewilderment at Veron's words and his suspicion of Nerogun all buzzing in his head.

So clear it, he instructed himself sternly. Put it aside. The banquet is what matters now. Go and change: put on your finest robes.

Put on your majesty, put on your kingship of Caervonn. Put on your courtesy and chivalry. Prepare to meet the women. Prepare to meet your bride.

## Chapter 8

Huldarion had long known this was the price that must be paid. He was not free to choose a wife without regard to his position. He had to make an apt alliance, and a useful one.

He had resigned himself to it for years; and at last the time had come. The Vonn needed Kelvha's military might: Kelvha valued the prestige and ancient title of the Vonn, a lineage far older than their own. So now he was to be offered a Kelvhan bride.

Tiburé had told him that he would get a choice of offerings, all young, the number of them depending on which high-ranking girls were available at the time. He knew the young women concerned would not expect to have any say in the matter. The whole thing made him feel queasy, as if he were witnessing some barbaric sacrifice.

But he had not only to witness it, but to choose the victim... Sitting in the banqueting hall at the long top table, beneath the scarlet banners and the bright heraldic shields, he automatically praised the dishes set before him while his mind was wholly on his fate.

He found himself almost unable to eat. He had to pretend, which was a shame, because the food was very good. Baked this, roast that, sautéed the other, all served by a continuous synchronised line of servants – more numerous than the diners – who were constantly interweaving in a miracle of co-ordination to and from the large doors that must lead to the kitchens.

He imagined that back there would be a maelstrom of sweating cooks and frantic kitchen-maids: but out here all was serene luxury. A minstrel played a lutine in the corner. There was a polite murmur of conversation from the noblemen's long table, set to his left, at right angles to the top table. On the table to his right hand there was silence: for that was where the women were, accompanied by their personal maids. None of them was speaking.

Huldarion wondered if the arrangement of women on the right was traditional, or was designed to hide the scarred side of his face from the victims for as long as possible. They would have heard about the scars, though, he assumed. He hoped so.

He turned to the High Prince, sitting on his left. "I congratulate you on your kitchen's skill. This is a most delicious fowl, your Highness."

"It is, isn't it?" said Faldron artlessly. "I believe these are partridges or linnets or some such. A little small for hunting." The ancient Vizier on the Prince's other side nodded and kept nodding. The Prince's great-uncle, he had once been a noted diplomat; had in his time been an astute and knowledgeable man. Now, when Huldarion spoke to him, that knowledge seemed vaguely and hesitantly offered.

On Huldarion's other side, beyond the Post-Regent Nerogun, sat his own four men. Their presence was both a comfort and an embarrassment. They would be judging the offerings just as he did: wondering which woman he would take, assessing their reactions to him. When Uld appeared, to tell him with a bow that Rothir was now sitting up and talking, he was relieved but also faintly dismayed to have Uld added to the number of spectators.

At least he could stop worrying about Rothir for the evening. And his sixth man would not be here; for Parthenal had asked permission to miss the feast and stay with his injured friend. It now crossed Huldarion's mind, strangely, that Parthenal might not wish to see him choose a wife...

But why think that? He had no reason to suppose it. Why think of Parthenal at all? Think only of the women.

There were five victims lined up for him, sitting at the long table to his right. He had hardly cast a glance at them – for to show curiosity would have been ill-mannered – but

he was oppressively aware of them, highly adorned and immaculately dressed, their faces cast decorously down, waiting for their moment to be presented after everyone had eaten. They themselves barely ate. Perhaps eating was indecorous. Or perhaps they felt as apprehensive as he did himself.

He understood that after the banquet they were to be presented to him in descending order of rank and hence desirability. Top of the list was the Prince's younger sister, the Princess Idria. To be offered her, Tiburé had assured him, was a sign of the Kelvhans' high regard for him. So that was encouraging. And further down the list was Nerogun's own daughter; for the Post-Regent was some sort of third or fourth cousin of the Prince – possibly twice over, so convoluted and close-knit were the lines of noble ancestry in Kelvha. He wondered if Nerogun had personally added his own child to the list of candidates.

At the moment, however, Nerogun was not looking towards his daughter or any of the women, but was keeping a sharp eye on the servants, although the busy ranks of waitresses and footmen were already well-controlled by the housekeeper bossing them about at the back of the hall. Huldarion pondered the fact that Nerogun was offering his daughter. What exactly did that mean? Would the girl have seen her potential groom already, even if only from a distance? Would any of them? His head hummed with conjectures.

Meanwhile he had to make small talk with the Prince and Vizier while the main courses were finished with dragging slowness. At last, while they were toying with the final sweetmeats – miniature edifices of decorative pastry – the minstrel ceased his somewhat monotonous playing. The chattering stilled. In the sudden silence the Princess Idria rose with a graceful movement and left her seat.

Her dress was swiftly rearranged by a brace of maids before she was led by footmen around the end of the ladies' table and up the centre of the chamber. A very public progress. An ornate and uncomfortable-looking chair had been placed by a pair of footmen on the far side of the top table, opposite Huldarion.

The Princess walked in small, careful steps, eyes down, except for one swift glance that flickered along the table at the Riders. Making a deep curtsy, she settled herself in the chair, skilfully arranging her rich robes around her; her back to the room, her face towards him.

Huldarion knew then that it was the first time the Princess Idria had seen the full extent of his burns. Her recoil was instinctive and quickly controlled. None the less, he recognised it and was dismayed on her behalf. She sent another flickering glance along the table, and he thought, I'm sorry, my child, but neither Aretor nor Sashel is for you. You're stuck with the ugly one.

He was filled with pity. She was only seventeen: less than half his age. Pale and pretty, with delicate features, not unlike a diminutive version of her brother who now waved a casual hand at her before picking up another sweetmeat. This momentous occasion in her life meant nothing to the Prince. It was just what women were for.

And she was a very unobjectionable princess, beautifully turned out, her manners polished and her voice sweet as she answered his commonplace questions. Yet she looked to be in shock. Although she managed to speak appropriately, she could not stop her eyes from darting to the scars.

He asked her the harmless questions that he had prepared: what her favoured pastimes were – did she like music, did she ride, what was the best walk in the palace gardens, and so on – all designed not so much for information as merely to try and put her at her ease. Despite her careful manners she could not be put at ease, and he felt sorry for her. He would not marry a frightened child no matter what her rank.

After the allotted ten minutes or so, he farewelled her courteously. She rose with a little flurry, no doubt of relief. He steeled himself as he waited for the next one to recoil in fright.

But the next one was a little better. Her name was Janeya, and although she was still young, she was not so dreadfully young – twenty-two, the Post-Regent assured him as she walked up, her steps not so small and tentative as Idria's – and of impeccable pedigree. She was the niece of Melegan, the Keeper of the Keys, who was Tiburé's host; Huldarion recalled him as a self-important but well-meaning man. Janeya's hair was unbleached, an unfashionable glossy brown. Perhaps that was a sign of an independent spirit. And to be unmarried at the age of twenty-two might well indicate that she had refused at least one previous suitor.

He found himself hoping that she would not refuse him if he asked, because she might do. He thought that he could live with her, and perhaps she could bring herself to live with him. For she looked at him and his scar with compassion rather than with horror, and spoke gently and with intelligence. She liked music, played the lutine and the harp, and even asked him if he sang; at which he answered, truthfully, not very well. She smiled.

But her heart was not entirely in it. The smile was courteous, not warm. As she rose gracefully from her chair he saw her throw a swift glance towards the line of nobles seated on the left-hand table. And one young lord gave her a long, intense look back... So maybe that was it. He hoped the Post-Regent had not noticed. He had already seen that Nerogun did not like to be gainsaid: and he had a feeling that his reach was very long.

Still, Janeya was a possible. She was certainly a better prospect than the third, Belfura, the old Vizier's grand-daughter: a pert young woman with a coy manner who evidently thought herself the obvious choice. Physically she was attractive enough but her complacent flirtatiousness repelled him. Eyelashes fluttering, she used one finger to twirl her stiff blonde curls as if to draw attention to them. While he spoke, she smirked and eyed him sidelong, her gaze skating off his scars. And when he asked her how she passed her time she just looked blank.

So, on to number four. This one, Gaelera, was older than the others, twenty-seven according to her father Nerogun. Although that was still young by Huldarion's own standards, it was decidedly old by Kelvha's, and he thought it strange she was not married. Perhaps the Post-Regent had considered nobody good enough for her till now.

But she herself was also strange. She equalled Huldarion in impassivity, giving him no clue to her feelings for the whole ten minutes. She remained totally expressionless.

"I embroider," she said, answering his standard question, "in silks." No mention of enjoyment.

"What do you embroider?"

"Dresses; furnishings; wall-hangings. It is traditional for ladies of the castle to thus employ themselves. You may see the offspring of their dextrousness in many rooms." Despite the apparent mundanity of her existence Gaelera spoke well enough to show she was no fool. Nerogun, who had interposed one or two questions to the other women – showing his authority – sat back in his chair during this interview, and remained completely silent.

Was Gaelera a possible? Huldarion could not guess anything of her character from her words or manner: she was a blank, and he felt himself stymied. But he decided that he was not inclined to marry Nerogun's daughter. Although it might be diplomatically advantageous he did not want that man for his father-in-law. The Post-Regent had too much power as it was. So, no. One left.

And the last one was the worst of all. Sina, a daughter of a lesser noble but a beauty, according to the Post-Regent, though Huldarion could not agree: stick-thin, gaunt-cheeked, she looked as if she had been crying. He wondered if she had been beaten into this. Or would be beaten if she failed. He questioned her as gently as he could and strained to hear her too-brief, whispered answers.

As she was led away, he smiled at her, although it hurt to smile, pulling at his scar. He hoped it would not look too much like a grimace. If she were beaten it must not have anything to do with his reaction.

"They are all lovely, are they not?" the Post-Regent commented once Sina had returned to her table. The women were all rising now, in a rustle of skirts, to be led out en masse.

"Exceptionally so. You make it very difficult to choose." But he had to choose. It would have to be the second one, Janeya, thought Huldarion, as he watched the women start to walk away; and when he saw her cast another covert glance across the room towards the lordlings, his heart sank. You give yourself away, child, he thought, wincing. Could he do this do her? Again he hoped Nerogun had not noticed.

But luckily there was an abrupt distraction: a young footman standing behind the lords dropped a large pile of plates. They crashed spectacularly on the flagstoned floor, and as sweetmeats were scattered across laps, there were loud curses and chairs angrily pushed back. Nerogun pushed his own chair back with a snarl of impatience and strode over to chastise the careless youth.

The housekeeper got there first, marching briskly down from the back of the hall. The footman was subjected to a brief but withering scolding; she pushed him towards the door leading to the kitchens, out of Nerogun's reach, even as the Post-Regent marched up, hands twitching.

She turned to Nerogun. "I'll see that it's cleaned up," she said firmly, with an assurance that showed Huldarion she was not a housekeeper at all. Only a very high-ranking woman would dare to talk to Nerogun like that. She was not dressed for a banquet, but she was dressed well; her hair was tied back, severe and practical. Neither was she middle-aged as he had thought at first. He judged her to be over thirty, but not much over.

As the Post-Regent resumed his seat, grumbling, Huldarion asked him,

"Who is that lady?"

"She's Meya. She's my bossy cousin," said the Prince, "second or third, is it, Nerogun?"

"Second cousin once removed. She is a widow, my lord. Her father was the late renowned General Borovin, and she was married to one of our most esteemed commanders, Inigun, who sadly died four years ago in battle. He is much regretted."

"I am sure he is. May I be introduced to her?" asked Huldarion.

Nerogun looked surprised. "The Lady Meya? She is over thirty, my lord, and as I say, a widow. Spoilt goods."

"We do not regard widows as such among our people," he said levelly.

"Well...! If you wish, of course... She has high rank, and she is certainly fertile, there is that to be said for her. There is a daughter somewhere. I will have her called over."

A footman was instructed to summon Lady Meya. She walked up to the table without bothering to adjust her dress, and curtsied. Then she looked Huldarion straight in the eye with a faint air of impatience, as if she had better things to do. He liked that.

"Will you be seated?"

She sat down gracefully in the narrow chair although it only just accommodated her hips. She had a fuller figure than any of the other women, and held her head very upright.

"I trust I find you well," said Huldarion. She inclined her head. She was not going to give him any help, then. He was amused.

"What are your duties here in the palace?" he asked her, and that did visibly surprise her.

"The ladies of our household have no duties," put in the old vizier, as if it was a dirty word. "They may choose to take an interest if it amuses them."

Huldarion inclined his head in turn. "We have a differing understanding of duty," he said mildly. "In what do you take an interest, Lady Meya? Do you, perhaps, embroider?"

"I prefer to be active. I take an interest in making the castle run smoothly," she answered in a calm, firm voice. "I like to see things properly done."

Nerogun snorted. "Like that fiasco with the plates just now?"

"The serving-man will be duly punished, my lord. You need not concern yourself." She spoke to the Post-Regent with just enough deference. Only just enough: Huldarion sensed Nerogun's faint annoyance.

"And how many servants have you in the castle?" he asked Meya.

It was a vast quantity, of course. But she knew the exact numbers of maids, footmen, grooms and kitchen staff. When he inquired further, she knew from which villages they were most likely to be drawn. She knew where those villages were, and what goods they traded in as well as servants. After that first cool look she paid no particular attention to his scars. She did not look at Nerogun at all. She had self-discipline and self-assurance.

Huldarion was impressed, although he hoped he did not show it. He had an idea that there was some antagonism between Meya and Nerogun, and wondered if the Post-Regent resented a woman who would assume any semblance of power, even if only in the servants' hall.

Instinctively he felt that mentioning her confidence or intellectual qualities would not serve his purpose. So after the conversation was concluded, when the Post-Regent asked him what he thought of Lady Meya, he said merely, "She is a fine figure of a woman," and watched her walk away as if that figure were the only thing that interested him.

"She was once," replied Nerogun. "She has thickened up since having her child, unfortunately."

"I would describe her as pleasantly robust," said Huldarion. He wished he knew how to assume a lustful look. He wished he could assume any look at all.

"If you like her," said the Post-Regent indulgently, "you may certainly see her again. I can ask her for a further meeting." Huldarion could almost hear his mental re-calculations: why waste a perfectly good princess on a man who would be content with older, spoilt goods? And they could be rid of a slightly troublesome woman into the bargain.

"I like Meya," said the young Prince, artlessly, "but she can be a bit formidable. She once told me off for sliding down the banisters. Years ago, of course."

"Then she spoke beyond her station," said Nerogun sharply.

"I am sure she can be trained," said Huldarion, although he was sure that she could not and that he would not want to try. But that was why he had already decided on her. She was not afraid of him. She would approach him as an equal. If she allowed a second meeting, he would offer for her: and she would not be afraid to refuse him, if she wished. But he hoped that she would not refuse.

And once this war against the stonemen was over – and if Caervonn was won – he could give her the option to get out of the marriage; and she would have the courage to do that as well if she wanted. All this he thought within one minute. He knew it was a terrifyingly swift decision, but probably the best that he could make under the circumstances. Other choices were unlikely to be offered now.

“Well, shall we arrange another meeting?” said Nerogun somewhat patronisingly. He had obviously marked Huldarion down for a lecherous fool.

He smiled. “Please do. She is a fine figure of a woman.”

## Chapter 9

"The Lord Huldarion begs another meeting," said Nerogun in the empty dining hall, his tone a mixture of complacency and faint contempt.

Meya looked over at him with some surprise, which she took care not to show. "He begs?"

"Requests. It seems he likes the fuller figure. I daresay you could make him beg if you showed him a little more of it."

Meya closed the cupboard whose contents she had been inspecting, and considered.

"I am flattered," she said eventually, without emotion, because whatever she decided, she did not want to seem too eager.

"He likes his women pleasantly robust. You seem to fit the bill. Well, Lady Meya? What is your answer?"

*My answer is that you should show more courtesy,* she thought; but Nerogun's disdain of her was not new and would not change now. Unless she took Huldarion.

But it really had not seemed a possibility. Although last night she had mulled over the unexpected interview, she had come to the conclusion that Huldarion was simply curious about the workings of the castle. Or curious about her role in it. Which was, admittedly, unusual; and Nerogun was not the only man who did not care for it. She, for her part, did not care for Nerogun.

Nerogun could have me ousted at any time, she thought, despite my standing. I could be relegated to the ranks of maiden aunts who have no role, no status, and no occupation. And what about my daughter?

"Well?" He was impatient.

She gazed at the cupboard door and visualised Huldarion: a man hard to read, although she had not had long to try. The scarring did not help. Otherwise, however, the scars were irrelevant to her apart from how they might affect his character. Her husband's war wounds had sometimes made him tetchy.

"I suppose there is no harm in a second meeting," she replied eventually, as if in resignation. "It commits me to nothing, after all."

"It commits you to plenty," warned Nerogun in a low rumble. Even when talking quietly his voice held the weight of his authority. Like a battering ram moving steadily towards its target, she thought. "You would need a very good reason to refuse him after a second meeting."

"And he may give me a very good reason," she said calmly.

"The honour of Kelvha is at stake."

"When have I ever failed to uphold the honour of Kelvha?" Meya was indignant, but did not show her anger, because Nerogun liked anger almost as much as he liked distress. He pretended to dislike them both but she saw differently. So she merely added, "Let me know in good time when the meeting is to be," and walked on down the long dining hall to the next cupboard.

She opened it to inspect tureens. One was not quite clean. By the time she looked round again, with it in her hands, Nerogun was gone.

And now Meya drew a long breath and sat down on the carved oak bench under the window, with the tureen in her lap, to consider. Was this really wise?

She knew that Nerogun was right: to accept a second meeting was as good as saying she would wed the Vonnish chief. A man she had spoken to for a bare ten minutes, although she had observed him for a little longer than that.



For last night she had watched Huldarion carefully, in between watching the servants, from the moment he had walked into the banqueting hall – not because she had any interest on her own account, but because she cared about the welfare of at least two of his potential brides. In fact, three of them; but the Princess Idria would always be well looked after. Idria would never find herself being thrown out of the castle for disobedience or whipped for her failure to please.

Huldarion had probably decided Idria was too young. Meya thought so herself; like her brother Faldron, the princess was immature even for her age. Another year would help her. Meya had decided that if Huldarion had any sense, he would pick Janeya, and she was relieved to see that Janeya had behaved herself. Until that last moment, anyway, when the crash of plates had provided such necessary distraction.

But he had not asked for Janeya. He had asked for *her*. Meya could not fathom it, unless Janeya were also, in his mind, too young. Belfura had probably overdone the eyelash-fluttering – how inexplicably vain that ignorant girl was! – and if Gaelera had given him her usual stone-face it was no surprise that she had not been chosen.

Meya wondered briefly how her father Nerogun had reacted to that, but she did not care so much about Gaelera. She cared about Janeya. And also Sina. She had seen the way Huldarion had smiled at Sina, at the end of the parade of brides. It had been an awkward smile – inevitably, given his scars – but, Meya thought, it had been compassionate. It had been kindly meant.

Then she realised that was what she'd visualised a few minutes ago, when she agreed to a second meeting with Huldarion. She had remembered that kindly-meant, grimacing, stiff, awkward smile, directed at another woman. It wasn't much to go on. But it was all she had.

Well, she'd taken the decision now. Unless Huldarion proved on second meeting to be completely unacceptable, she would have to marry him. It could make sense for her. Though she knew little of Caervonn, life there could hardly be more restrictive than it was in Kelvha. Meanwhile, her position here would be secure. And her daughter...

Oh, Aliya, she thought, Aliya, my Aliya, feeling that sudden, familiar ache, that need to hold her, impossible to fulfil. Her daughter was in Outer Kelvha, living in the countryside, as was customary for younger children, with a high-born family – relatives of Melegan, and, like him, generous and benign. Aliya had been there for eighteen months already, and although Meya visited when she could, it was not often enough.

But in another two years, when Aliya was seven, she would need to return to Inner Kelvha and begin her duties at the castle. I do not want that for her, Meya thought.

Her daughter was still in her mind when she received the formal message. She immediately sent back her answer. Yes, she would meet with the Lord Huldarion in two hours, in the castle gardens.

She appreciated his choice of venue. It meant a modicum of privacy: there would be several others there, of course, attending them around the gardens, but those others would not be able to note every word and look while strolling round the rose-beds as they could when seated at a table. Inside the castle buildings, walls had ears. The shrubs outside did not.

The two hours were to allow her to prepare her dress, her hair, her face, her ornaments and anything else required. She did none of that beyond a cursory look in the mirror and a neatening of her hair, tied back as always. No fine robe could give her the slender figure of a seventeen year old princess; however, she was satisfied that her dress did make the most of such assets as she had, if Huldarion really cared about those. And her plain gold necklet was ornament enough.

She went to summon her first maid, who would need to accompany her: and found her, after some irritated searching, in an upper room near Lady Sina's quarters, in a huddle with Sina's chambermaid. They were whispering together.

"What is it, girls?" she asked, walking up to them. The servants knew they would not be punished for speaking plainly to her; at the same time, Meya did not permit insolence. She had long ago learned how to raise her chin and tilt her head a little, quelling with a look. It always surprised her that so many other noblewomen could not do the same.

Her own maid, Eral, dropped a curtsey. "Ma'am, Kimal says that the Lady Sina is having one of her turns and will not be consoled."

She turned to the other maid. "Kimal. Your mistress does not have turns. She is indisposed."

"Yes, ma'am. But she won't take any remedy, she just keeps on crying, ma'am, and nothing I try to say to her helps, and really I'm at my wits' end when she--"

"Kimal."

"Ma'am."

"Your concern for your mistress does you credit. But the way in which you speak of it does not. Is she alone in her room now?"

"The Lady Janeya is with her."

"I took the liberty of fetching the Lady Janeya, Ma'am, when I could not find you," said Eral. "The Lady Janeya being her friend, Ma'am."

"Very well. I will go and talk to them." As she swept into Sina's private chamber she wondered how much the servants' hall knew of the previous night's banquet. Everything, probably, given the numbers that had been present: wherever a servant went, a story would come out. And why not? They had no interest in keeping the secrets of their superiors.

In any case last night's events could hardly be a secret to anybody in the castle. So many people had witnessed her being called up before Huldarion even if they could not hear the conversation.

None the less she closed the door carefully behind her before she said, "Sina, what is it? Is it your uncle?"

The pair of them were sitting in the window seat, Sina crying and hiccuping, Janeya with one arm around her, trying to comfort her. When the weeping girl turned to face Meya, her appearance was haunted, with red eyes and pale, hollow cheeks. A living ghost, thought Meya in pity and some exasperation. It would help if the girl would eat.

Sina's words were broken up with sobs. "He s-said I was a dis-disgrace to the family. He said I looked like a, a, a frightened slave."

"Who said? Your uncle Shargun? How would he know what you looked like? He wasn't even there."

"He said if, if, if I'd really tried I could have had Huldarion. I did try. I did, did my best. But I knew all along that he wouldn't, wouldn't want me, that he'd choose Idria or Janeya..."

"He hasn't chosen anyone yet," said Janeya, holding her hand.

"I knew my uncle would be angry with me no matter what I did." And Sina burst into another wave of crying, the breath coming in great whoops as her thin body shook with the effort of misery.

"Be still," said Meya. She tried to conceal her exasperation because it would upset Sina further. "Be still, my dear. Huldarion has asked for a second meeting, but not with either Idria or Janeya." She looked at Janeya. "I'm sorry, Janeya."

"I'm not," she said with a long sigh. "Oh, what a relief that is!"

"Hush! Don't speak that way," Meya adjured her. "You may think it but don't say it." Walls had ears.

"But who has he...? Not Gaelera, surely?" asked Janeya in a quieter voice.

"Belfura," murmured Sina.

"Extraordinary though it is," said Meya, "it seems that he has chosen me."

They both looked at her in wide-eyed incredulity. Sina's sobs halted to a gulping shudder, although her mouth stayed open. So that's the way to stop her tears, thought Meya with resigned amusement. Surprise her with the impossible.

"According to Nerogun," she continued wryly, "Huldarion prefers a fuller figure. Presumably a woman closer to his own age too. It seems widowhood is no bar for the Vonn. Actually," she added, voicing the thought that had come to her while she walked through the castle, "it may be simply because I'm both the widow and the daughter of military men. And that's the world he lives in, so he has chosen someone familiar with it. So, Sina, next time your uncle tries to belittle you, blame Huldarion for his strange tastes. Or else blame me."

"Have you accepted him?"

"I go to the second meeting in an hour or two." They both knew what that meant.

"Well," said Janeya, "I wish you very happy, Lady Meya. I'm sure the Lord Huldarion will make you an excellent husband." And she curtsied very nicely.

"Thank you, Janeya."

"Yes, I'm sure he will," said Sina, more doubtfully. "I wish you happy." Her misery had been replaced by astonishment. Meya reflected ruefully that they both regarded her as too old and stout to be attractive, and Huldarion's choice as nothing less than eccentric. But in the light of that choice, surely even Shargun would now agree that Sina had stood no chance from the start.

"Belfura will be annoyed," Janeya said.

"She would be wise not to tell me so," said Meya coolly.

"Oh. Quite." The two of them were still staring at her. She wanted to say to Janeya, *Don't think this means that you can follow your own wishes now*. However, that was something that would have to wait until they could be private.

So she merely said, "Wipe away your tears, Sina, and then eat some lunch."

"I'll try," said Sina.

She left the two girls hugging each other, and told Kimal to go back in to them. Her own maid, Eral, she bade make herself ready to accompany her to the castle garden. She did not tell her why.

What about the other candidates? As Meya returned to her own chambers, she thought about their reactions. Idria would not take offence; like Janeya, she would probably be relieved. But the news needed to come to her through official channels, not from Meya. Belfura she did not care about. Gaelera...

She stopped in mid-stride, considering, and then changed her direction and made her way to the south wing where Gaelera had her quarters in the corner tower, quite separately to her father Nerogun's.

Meya knocked and was announced by the maidservant. When she entered the small, high-roofed chamber, Gaelera sat in the window seat, embroidering. She was always embroidering when anyone was announced, although Meya suspected that the needle was only picked up for visitors, and she had no idea how Gaelera actually spent her days. Perhaps in looking out of the window at the activity in the courtyard down below.

She swept a deep curtsy, for although nominally she out-ranked Gaelera, she was cautious of her. And not just because of her father. She chose her words with care.

"My lady Gaelera. I wished to be the one to tell you, out my respect for you, that the Lord Huldarion has requested a second meeting with me."

There was a long silence while Gaelera gazed at her, laying her sewing in her lap. Her face gave no hint of her thoughts. In the corner of the room a caged linnet sang its busy, ever-changing song. A beautiful sound: there was no other. The maid stood by with her head bowed.

After a moment Meya felt obliged to add, "It was not something that I sought."

"But you have accepted the second meeting."

"Yes." Again she felt obliged to elucidate. "I felt it was my duty."

"No doubt," Gaelera said. She still gazed at Meya. "What does my father say of the matter?"

"I... believe that he does not object."

"No." At last she dropped her gaze and resumed her sewing. "I thank you for the visit."

Meya curtsied and left the room. She stood outside the door to wonder, as always. What went on inside Gaelera's head? But there was never any clue.

And now it was almost time. She returned to her quarters to collect her maid Eral, who became more flustered than she was herself at the news of why they were going to the garden. Meya had to calm her as they walked down the long stairs.

The gardens were just outside the castle wall on the south side, encircled by their own high wall and entered through a gateway that was really a short stone tunnel. It was chilly in the tunnel, then warm in the spring sunlight.

He was there, with two of his men. One of them frowned at her and then looked at the ground. Huldarion did not smile with his mouth but his eyes seemed to smile, perhaps, a little. Nerogun was there too, of course, and Jorgun the old Vizier, who was absent-mindedly inspecting the roses: and there were several footmen standing round the edges.

"My lady Meya," said Huldarion, "is there a walk which you prefer?"

She had already thought about this, and said, "I like the herb garden. It is this way." The path was just wide enough for them to walk side by side. His two men had to follow behind, and Nerogun to lurk on a parallel path. The old Vizier lingered by his roses.

"You prefer useful plants to pretty ones?" Huldarion asked her.

"I prefer everything useful, if it can be."

When he spoke again, she could hear the smile. "I know that you have made yourself extremely useful in the castle. But I hope you might consider taking up other duties – other interests, I should say – elsewhere."

Her heart gave a great leap. "The castle is my home," she said, "but a person may have more than one home."

"A person may have many. I have many homes, if you may call them that, at present: but one true home which I have not seen for several years, yet where I hope to live and rule again."

"Caervonn."

"Caervonn."

From the way he said it she understood at once: that was where his heart lay. Caervonn was what he loved and longed for. A wife was merely necessary to open the path there.

"I would like to hear about Caervonn," she said, feeling as a woman might who asked about a former lover. A little curious; left out. But she did not mind. The scent of roses dissipated as they entered the herb-garden with its less sweet but more interesting fragrances. Its untidy shrubs, thyme and rosemary and her favourite, hyssop, were scattered with their first small purple blooms, ignored by flower-pickers but beloved by the bees.

Caervonn was built to echo a bee-hive, said Huldarion, and he began to picture it for her; describing hexagonal towers, many six-sided courtyards filled with greenery and blossom, the far views from banked terraces towards the distant sea. He spoke with love and yearning manifest in every word, although he probably did not realise it.

I will be King there, he said with quiet authority. But Caervonn lacks the queen that every hive requires.

So, in that herb-garden, by the seductive murmuring disorder of the hyssop-bed, Huldarion asked Meya to marry him. She paused a moment, listening to the hum of bees, and rubbed the leaves between her fingers; and then she answered yes.

## Chapter 10

Rothir wasn't used to being given so much attention. It wasn't unpleasant, but it felt strange.

When he woke up he'd been surrounded by the staring faces of several Riders – Parthenal, Uld, Veron, Tiburé and a few others – and he couldn't think why they were all there looking down at him. Although he soon became aware that he was lying on his bed within his lodgings, it took a few more moments for him to realise he was sore and bleeding.

So he had evidently been fighting in some battle. But memory of it eluded him until Veron said,

"I expect you don't remember. People sometimes don't, after she's... reproved them. If they survive."

"Remember what? Who do you mean?" He began to heave himself stiffly into a sitting position until Parthenal pushed him down again, gently but firmly.

"Lie still. I've got another gash to clean up yet. None of them is life-threatening, amazingly enough, but you don't want them to get infected. You never know, with claws like that."

"Claws?"

"I mean my wife," said Veron. He rested his hand briefly on Rothir's forehead. Yet his fingers did not touch the skin: there seemed to be a bandage there. "I thought she might have killed you."

Then Rothir remembered, in a flash of blinding white and blue. It was like a spear of ice that splintered through his head. He saw again the great cat pacing in its cage; he felt himself run down to leap the gate, rash blundering idiot that he was. He knew himself, incredulously, to have held up his home-made sword and short knife against those lethal claws. That magnificent sleek power. Those eyes, those golden eyes...

He closed his own again. "I wish I hadn't been the one to kill it."

"I know," Veron said. "But you saved a few lives there as well as mine. Those guards could never have kept it out of the audience. I told her that you had to do it."

"You told..." At this, Rothir's eyes reopened and he did sit up, against Parthenal's restraining hand, to look around. "Is everybody safe? Is everyone all right?"

"Everyone except you," said Uld. He patted Rothir briefly on the shoulder. "I'll go back to the castle now, and let Huldarion know that you're alive and kicking. He'll be relieved."

"He'll be thinking about other things," said Parthenal drily. "We'll want to know how it all goes at the banquet, Uld."

Uld shook his head as he left. He would not be the man to tell them anything.

Rothir lay back again as Parthenal finished dressing the gash along his arm. Although he didn't remember getting the wound, that was often the way in battle. And it had been a battle: he was remembering it fully now, reliving it unwillingly but inescapably; and the memory shocked him.

"I'll leave you too," said Veron, his voice unusually tender. He held out his hand, and Rothir, not knowing what was expected of him, took it. A cool, tough hand. "You may find you feel... a little strange for a while to come. That's simply the effect of being rebuked by her. It was only a token – a reminder. The huntress could have killed you easily. Take it as a grace from her that she chose not to."

"I am grateful," Rothir said. Feel a little strange? He felt strange now. Floating on some silver sea. Not altogether there. And, yes, grateful. Veron released his hand, and left.

"I think that must be the most I've ever heard him talk," said Delgeb.

"You can't have been listening," said Parthenal. "There. All done." He began to roll up the unused bandages. Rothir inspected the used ones: both arms, one leg, his chest, his head. But despite their dressings they were still all there, intact.

"Thanks," he said. "You'd better hurry off and join the others at the feast. Aren't they expecting you?"

"No; I told them I'd stay here to keep an eye on you. I'm not bothered about the banquet."

"You're not curious?" asked Delgeb.

"Not especially."

She raised an eyebrow. "If they were young men you would be."

"Hah! But even so, not as curious as you," retorted Parthenal.

"You're probably right there. However," Delgeb said, "I'm more curious about something else just now. Tiburé has told us that she's found the darkburn."

"The darkburn?" said Rothir, trying to work out why a darkburn had suddenly entered the conversation. "What... Where was it? Was it close?" Even at the word he seemed to feel its sudden intense heat. But maybe that was fever.

Everyone had turned to look at Tiburé, who was wearing a stately, heavy Kelvhan dress, although he could not quite remember why. As Tiburé began to tell her tale of a journey through the city, he tried to listen. But half of him seemed to be somewhere else, adrift on that heavy shining sea. He felt muddled.

"What temple?" he asked. "What was Yaret going in there for?"

Tiburé sighed and explained that they wanted to find out about Borgun. None of it made sense to him.

"Anyway, what she learnt in the temple will have to wait until I see Huldarion," said Tiburé. "That's not what I was going to talk about."

"So tell us how you found the darkburn!" Landel begged.

Next she began to describe a walk through city streets, and seeing the hunter Zan. Rothir could not understand what Zan was doing in the story but did not like to ask. He made a greater effort to follow Tiburé's account. Still not much of it made sense.

"Why the bath-house? What's the darkburn doing there?" he said eventually, and put a hand up to his head. It hurt. He became aware that everything was hurting, although it hadn't earlier. Now not just his head but all his flesh was throbbing, tearing, burning.

Parthenal was looking at him with a slight frown. "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been eaten and spat out," Rothir said thickly.

"Well, anyone would spit *you* out," said Parthenal. "Tough as an old boot. Delgeb? Can you go and find Shebel?"

He tried to say that he didn't want Shebel or her herbs, he wanted something else entirely, but the words wouldn't make their way to his mouth. His head was filling up with silver ocean. He lay back again and let the waves wash through him. Painful waves. Heavy, smooth, like quicksilver. They rose at his forehead and crashed at the back. They were almost solid. They threatened to submerge him. He tried not to be submerged but it was difficult.

Then Shebel arrived and made him drink something bitter, which might have been ethlon, and after a moment the heavy silver tide withdrew just enough to let him realise that she had brought three other women with her: Maeneb, Naileb and Yaret, three maids all standing in a row. It would have been funny if they hadn't looked so anxious. But Parthenal had said his wounds weren't life-threatening.

"I'm fine," he said. Or did he say it? He wasn't sure. And if Maeneb had come into a crowded room just to see him, maybe he wasn't so fine after all.

Shebel said, "You're not well at the moment. But you will soon feel better, and then you'll sleep. It's just a little fever, and maybe slight concussion." Parthenal took her to one side, to talk in a low voice; but Yaret sat down next to his bed.

"I feel like Eled," he said. His tongue wouldn't work properly.

She said nothing, but took his hand in hers: smoother than Veron's, and smaller. A companionable hand.

"I think that's just the effect the huntress has," she said after a moment. "Still prowling round inside your head."

"With claws," said Rothir. Of course, he thought, she's met the huntress too. Face to face. She knows. And she's still here. She's still alive. Her hand is warm. Steadying... Holds me up. There was something that I had to tell her. But maybe it doesn't matter now she's here.

And soon, whether because of the hand or the drugs, he did begin to feel a little better. The silver waves were not so high nor so impenetrable; he was able to swim through them. He didn't feel like sinking any more. Surfacing in silver ripples. Good medicine.

"I'll be all right now," he mumbled, just before he fell asleep. He had no dreams.

Next morning he woke to find that he had slept a full twelve hours; and he felt almost normal. The drugs had done their job. That, and someone who had held his hand. Veron, had it been? The huntress must have let him off.

So he was quite all right. None the less everybody kept telling him to take things easy. They were apparently expecting to hold some sort of celebration in the castle that evening – something to do with Huldarion, if a meeting went as hoped, he didn't quite follow it – but thankfully he would not be needed to attend.

"Fresh air is what you want," Theol told him. "You're coming out for a gentle ride with me. I've brought Narba over from the stables."

Rothir acquiesced. Theol, his second in command through the recent battles, was a sensible, easy-natured man, a dozen years older than Rothir although he seldom told him what to do. So when he did, Rothir listened.

"Where are we going?"

"Through the city gate and round the outer wall a little way," said Theol. "To find a bit of peace and quiet. It'll do you good to get out of the noise of the city."

The dressings on his chest had been removed. The ones on his arms and leg remained, although they had apparently been changed while he had slept. Neat work. He didn't even need to roll his sleeves up. And although it was a little tricky mounting Narba he was fine once he was up there. No dizziness at all.

And certainly it was pleasant to ride sedately on his beloved horse despite the crowded streets. In any case it was much quieter beyond the west gate. This was not nearly so grand as the east gate, through which the Vonn had made their entrance... When had that been? How many days ago? Not many, but he couldn't quite work out the exact number. Anyway, Theol spoke to the guards at the gate and they were very courteous. Their little group was allowed through with salutes and respectful bows.

"It seems that you're already famous," Theol commented once they were outside.

"What for?" he asked.

Theol rolled his eyes. "Tiger?"

"I don't want to be famous for that."

"You have no choice," said Maeneb. She had accompanied them, saying she too needed to get out of the streets and into the fields, away from all the voices of the city. There were four of them in the group, a good number, because Yaret came too, although she did not say why.



She was riding her little horse Helba which made him laugh. A sturdy little horse, but no beauty. Scruffy. He must have said it aloud.

"She suits me," said Yaret with a smile. "How are you feeling now?"

Rothir thought about it. They were riding north, with the high curved bulk of the city wall on their right. To their left were fields interspersed with farm sheds and cottages. It was all very ordinary. Tame. But none the less.

"I feel quite happy," he said, surprising himself. Yet it was true. It was probably relief at being out for a ride, at feeling Narba's reassuring bulk beneath him, at still being alive when yesterday he'd thought those golden eyes would be the last ones that he'd ever see.

Relief was happiness. He had often thought that before. But now it reminded him. Where had he been that time? Ah, when he found Eled.

He turned to Maeneb. "Where is Eled? Can you feel him? How is he doing?" He felt an extra concern and affinity for his young colleague now, because he had an idea that this odd mingling and mangling of his thoughts might be how Eled felt. Eled had concussion too. Confused together.

"He's the same as he was two days ago, when you last asked me," Maeneb said.

"Tell me again."

Maeneb put her head a little on one side, and seemed to listen. Then she shook her head. "No, I can't hear the Farwth from here. But I believe Eled is still in Farwithiel. The last report from the Farwth was just before we entered Kelvha. Eled was all right then. Still recovering, slowly."

"I hope I don't take that long," said Rothir.

"You won't," Theol assured him. "Veron said the strangeness will soon pass. Meanwhile it's good that you're feeling happy. Maybe I should take a cuff round the ear from the huntress myself if that's the result it has."

"No, you shouldn't," said Yaret and Maeneb in unison. Yaret added, "I don't think happiness is the usual result. That's just coincidental."

"It's good to be outside," said Rothir, and he patted Narba's strong shoulders in a surge of affection for his horse. "The four of us. Remind me where we're going."

"Just along the outside of the walls," said Yaret. "For a change of view and some fresh air. Does Caervonn have walls as huge as this?"

"Caervonn has terraced gardens all along its walls," said Rothir dreamily, "where you can walk in the summer evenings and look out from the top, and see fields and woods, and sometimes a hint of the sea."

"That will all be changed now," Theol said. "The terraces will be fortified."

"Did any of you leave family in Caervonn?" asked Yaret.

"My mother and I escaped with Huldarion," answered Maeneb. "We had no other family."

"I left several friends behind," said Theol. "We ended up on opposite sides during the war of succession."

"It was hardly a war," objected Maeneb. "It was a disagreement. It needed no war to decide it, merely a judgement by the council. Olvirion knew he was wrong to declare himself king instead of Huldarion."

"But Olvirion would never have accepted the council's judgement if it went against him. He would have still made war," said Theol. "And he would still have used the darkburn to ensure he won."

"Don't talk about the darkburn," Rothir said. "It's too nice a day." Hazy sunlight made the pastures shine. When they passed occasional farm carts, the drivers doffed their hats. Everything was pleasant.

Yaret looked at him. "Your family, Rothir?"

He shook his head. After a moment Theol said, "His father died in the war that apparently wasn't a war. His mother..."

Rothir normally never talked about his mother. He had never understood how she could have left them and his father. The anger and pain and grief at the time had been worse than if she'd died. But it didn't matter so much now. So he said,

"She'd already gone away, several years earlier, when I was sixteen. After the fire I brought my sister Olbeth out. She's married a farmer south and east of Kelvha; they have a baby. He's a good man. Wiln. They have hard winters on their farm." It had been a hard, bleak winter indeed – he remembered its cold emptiness, but spring had come. Everything was all right now. He smiled into the sunshine. Relief, that was the key.

He decided it would be good to ride on ahead. He was on a small hill of happiness, above the world, and wanted to stay there. So he began to trot on Narba, although he found that trotting was not as easy as it ought to be. It jolted his head and sent silver ripples through it. He speeded Narba to a canter, which was a little smoother, although it seemed to alarm Theol who rode up alongside him and grabbed hold of Narba's reins.

"I'm all right," said Rothir as they slowed. The cantering had done him good. It was enjoyable to have the company of Theol and the pair of women. They were easy company, those two; they could look after themselves, meaning that he didn't have to. Everyone was looking after him today, it seemed, so he didn't need to worry. Though sometimes it would be nice to have a woman to look after.

All in due course. Wait for Caervonn. There would be one there, the faithful, loving woman, as perfect as a rose, throwing petals from a balcony: he would know her when he saw her. Not all of them were like his mother. He knew that yearned-for woman was a fantasy, a soft dream to carry him through the hardness of his life. But sometimes you needed a soft dream. Not right now, though, because everyone was safe.

But it reminded him. "How did the banquet go last night? Huldarion and the ladies?" He had somehow forgotten about it until now.

"He chose one. But not the one that anyone expected," answered Theol. "A high-ranking widow, over thirty, quite handsome, Sashel said, but a bit scary. Sashel thought Huldarion would have gone for one of the first two. The princess was the prettiest, apparently: lovely manners, but very young and shy. Sashel felt quite sorry for her."

"I feel quite sorry for all of them," said Yaret, but Rothir found that he had already forgotten who they were talking about. They had come to a series of interesting buildings ranged along the wall, or built propped up against it. They seemed to be workshops from which clangs and thuds and hammering rang out.

"We're nearing the north gate," said Theol. "Can you feel anything, Maeneb?"

"I've never been able to detect it like I can people," she replied.

"We should all be able to feel it," said Yaret, "if we get close enough. Even through the wall."

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"We're looking for where there might be a bath-house," said Yaret.

"You want a bath-house? Don't your lodgings have a bath?" He studied the buildings. Too small. Ramshackle. None of them looked like a bath-house.

But there was a forge. The sign of the anvil hung outside it. That reminded him. He swung his leg over the saddle to dismount and grabbed his sword as he made for the entrance.

"Hey," said Theol. "Where are you going?"

Wasn't it obvious? "Into the forge."

When he entered, Theol followed him. The dark, the heat: the ringing of the hammer, so familiar; it made him think of Olbeth's farm, and he wished he was there now, hammering at ploughshares, with nothing to worry about.

There was always something to worry about. Not here, though, and not now, because he remembered that everyone was safe. And all was well. A young man in a leather apron put down his hammer and turned to face them.

"Can I help you?"

"I hope so," said Rothir. He gazed around. The tongs, the clamps, the buckets, the acidic smell of metal, such instruments of comfort. It was a warm, dark haven. "I have a sword that's badly notched. Could you repair it?"

"Certainly, sir. Would you like me to do it now?"

"Oh, wait," said Rothir, staring down at his sword, "it's the other one. My old one. This is the one I made."

"He's had a blow on the head," explained Theol.

"So I see," the smith replied, making Rothir wonder if he still wore his bandage. He put his hand up to check. Ah yes, there it was. Left by the tiger.

"You made that sword?" the smith asked. "May I see it?"

Rothir handed it over. The smith took it to the doorway, held it up and looked along its length.

"It's well forged," he said. "The hilt could be better."

"The next one will be better," said Rothir.

"Forgive me, sir, but you look like one of the Vonn noblemen who have lately honoured our city."

"I am a Rider of the Vonn."

"Then how is it you are a bladesmith?"

"Luck," said Rothir. "May I see your work?"

The smith bowed and ushered him over to the furnace.

"Don't let him near the fire," warned Theol. "Or the hammers."

Rothir smiled. He was enthralled by the smith's work: its fine, clean lines. On wooden panels set around the wall hung rows of arrowheads and spear points and halberds: and standing in the corner like a headless soldier was a full set of plate armour. Impressive, if too small for him, and he would never wear it anyway.

But he decided to buy a dozen arrowheads for Yaret, who for some reason he had forgotten was using stone ones. Then he realised he shouldn't buy a present for Yaret alone; so he picked out a small, neat knife for Maeneb.

After paying for these, he needed to ask the smith how he could improve his bevelling, and what he should do about the pommel of his sword. It didn't seem to matter that he promptly forgot the answers. He was very happy.

After a while Theol had to drag him out. "The man has work to do," he said.

"You're always welcome," said the smith, and Rothir put out his hand, saying, "Rothir."

The smith wiped his hands on his apron and shook his. "Martun," he said.

"Three hands in two days," said Rothir. Or did he only think it? He hoped so. It would be a strange thing to have said aloud. But it didn't matter because here were the two women, riding back towards them.

"What kept you?" Maeneb asked.

"A blacksmith with one ear," said Theol.

"He had two ears," said Rothir. "Didn't he?"

"One was missing," Theol said. "That's why he's a smith. A deformity. Not handsome enough for his noble family."

"Did he say that?" said Rothir. He felt confused.

"He implied it. While you were looking at the halberds."

"I bought you a present," said Rothir. "Both of you." He handed the presents over to the women, and watched Yaret open the little leather wallet and inspect the arrowheads. She looked delighted. He'd got it right, then.

"Thank you," she said, "very much."

"Neat little knife," said Maeneb. "It'll do for fruit."

"Where's mine?" asked Theol.

"Your reward is in my presence," Rothir said, "or something."

"You're still happy," remarked Yaret. "Aren't you?"

"I am quite content."

She studied him with a smile. "So maybe that's your normal state. Not dour and stern at all."

"Don't you believe it," said Theol. "Did you find the darkburn?"

He was startled. "Darkburn?"

But Yaret did not seem surprised at this sudden invasion of the enemy. "Yes," she answered. "We think so, anyway."

"Hang on," said Rothir. "Darkburn?"

"The one they're keeping in the northern bath-house," she explained. "We think it's quite close to here on the other side of the wall – only a couple of hundred yards away, not far from the north gate. There's a stream outlet through the wall: it smells terrible. There's a tannery nearby, but it's not just that, and it's not drains either. Come and have a look. Or a sniff."

He had forgotten all about the captive darkburn. How was that possible? But now they left the forge and rode on past the workshops and the tannery.

As they approached the north gate, the group paused as if contemplating the landscape, not the outlet in the wall beside them. Rothir had already seen the iron grid through which the water flowed. It was not a big opening, but big enough for a stooping man to step through, if the grid were to be removed.

And it stank. With that smell, the memories came lurching in.

"Locked," said Maeneb. "In fact, two locks. But not guarded on this side."

"The bath-house is probably inaccessible from this side," said Theol. "But I think you're right. It's there. It's the feel of it as well as the stink. Dismal, isn't it? Let's move away."

Rothir felt it too: the darkburn aura – the pall of failure, the heavy falling veil of regret, despair, impending doom. It turned the happiness grey and reminded him of all the things he needed to be worrying about.

"We shouldn't be chasing darkburns," he said. "We should leave it well alone."

"But the Kelvhans won't leave it alone," objected Maeneb. "We ought to keep track of it."

"It shouldn't be here at all," said Yaret.

"Well, it is, and there's nothing we can do about it," Rothir said. The surge of memory was gathering speed and volume. Everything seemed to rush back at him: the crash and blood and weariness of battle; the dreadful burials on the cold bleak plain; the stink of the darkburn trapped down in its pit, and how despite his misgivings he'd authorised Leor to raise it: how he'd watched apprehensively as it was carried back to Kelvha in its iron cart.

He was responsible for its presence here. No wonder Huldarion was angry. The knowledge pushed him off his little hill of happiness and beat him down.

"You're not going to try and set the darkburn free, are you?" he demanded. "Nothing could be more dangerous."

"I know that," said Yaret. "We just want to keep an eye on it. We've got no means of freeing it in any case."

"But someone might. What about Leor? Where is he?" He looked around accusingly as if the wizard might be lurking in one of the sheds that propped themselves against the city wall. He wouldn't put it past Leor. Too good at hiding.

"He's in the city somewhere," Maeneb said. "I feel him from time to time. He's quite distinctive. He's on the south side: I think he might be staying in a tavern."

"How can you know that?" he said severely.

"People feel different when they're drunk."

"Well, neither you nor Leor should be doing anything about this darkburn." He was addressing Yaret this time. "You should leave it to the Kelvhans. Keep out of the whole business. Leave the thing alone."

Yaret raised an eyebrow at him, and then nodded, quizzical, and slightly sad.

"Welcome back," she said.

## ***Chapter 11***

As he entered the grand hall, Parthenal saw the Kelvhan noble against whom he'd fought in single combat. Would have beaten, if the man hadn't forced a draw by such dubious means. They eyed each other; no hint of a smile there. Parthenal bowed slightly and moved away. The other man did likewise.

Politeness, that was the thing. The forty or so Riders here were all on their best behaviour. This was meant to be a celebration of Huldarion's forthcoming marriage. Wine and dance. But Parthenal wouldn't drink much, because he wanted to stay on top of things.

What those things were, he wasn't quite sure. It was stupid to feel such confusion – almost amounting to pain – within his breast. After all, he'd always known this time would come. Huldarion had to marry.

And he would marry without knowing anything of what Parthenal felt for him. That was the pact he had made with himself: Huldarion should not have even a hint. Ever. In return for this impeccable behaviour, Parthenal allowed himself licence to do what he liked, with anyone willing. Although not here in Kelvha city, of course.

He bowed again, to a gowned Kelvhan – it was Melegan, the Keeper of the Keys, Tiburé's somewhat pompous host; this time he got a vague, amiable smile – and then he made his way towards the other Riders who were seating themselves before the music started. There was no Rothir with whom he could exchange murmured observations: so he sat next to Sashel, who seemed more relaxed and less dejected than of late. Castle life was doing him good.

From his chair Parthenal was able to study Huldarion and the woman who sat beside him. Meya. He had been surprised when he first saw her: she was so old! So stout! On being introduced he had bowed and wished her well, and she had thanked him coolly. No trace of a smile from her either.

Meya looked like someone who would tolerate no nonsense. What their coming consummation would be like, Parthenal could not imagine, and did not want to, although his imagination would insist on trying. Pointless. He only knew it had to happen before the marriage. It sealed the pact.

And the marriage sealed the tactical alliance with Kelvha. Huldarion must have chosen Meya for her rank; which was evident in the upright, almost haughty way she bore herself. He would doubtless be content enough with his new wife, no matter what her age or girth or manner...

Don't be so mean-spirited, Parthenal told himself sternly. Meya's probably younger than you are. Probably cleverer. And better her, than some willowy beauty that Huldarion might actually fall in love with. That was a consoling thought.

Once everyone was seated around the three sides of the hall the music began, executed by the dozen men on the dais. Executed being, in Parthenal's opinion, the aptest word for it: there was an excess of trumpets, in his opinion, not enough lutines, and definitely too many of another peculiar stringed instrument – he couldn't recall its name, but it was played screechily in an unlikely manner with a stick. Although he generally enjoyed music he did not enjoy this.

However, others seemed to, and after a couple of tunes the dancing started, led by Huldarion and Meya. While Meya moved with surprising elegance for one so stout, Huldarion was somewhat stiff – but that was to be expected, and perhaps no more than was

suitable for the occasion. Parthenal found himself willing Huldarion to keep in time, and he did. Well, of course he did. Huldarion had never needed instruction in anything.

He sighed and looked away. Many of the Kelvhans were walking to the dance floor to join in now: first the High Prince holding the hand of his sister, Princess Idria – a dainty scrap of a thing – and then the other nobles and their wives.

The Post-Regent Nerogun stood at the sidelines like a critical dance-master: he had no wife to dance with, apparently, although he must have had one once because his daughter sat amongst the rows of Kelvhan ladies, their ranks now rapidly thinning as the men asked for their hands in the dance. Sashel had pointed out several of the ladies for him at the start. Gaelera, that was the daughter's name: he was surprised Nerogun did not ask her to stand up with him rather than sit there alone and increasingly conspicuous. Maybe dancing with one's daughters was not done.

Few of the Vonn had stood up to dance. Beside him Sashel's foot was tapping but his friend did not rise from his chair. Parthenal was tempted, for he liked dancing in the right circumstances, and the steps were not difficult; yet in truth, who could he dance with?

He was wary of the Kelvhan ladies, and there were only a handful of female Riders present. Tiburé and her daughter Alburé, of course, who had already been living in Kelvha for a while. But most of the other female Riders who were present sat in a close-knit group in their drab breeches, while several more had not turned up, having nothing suitable to wear.

However, Shebel was looking very fetching in a dress that had presumably been borrowed from Alburé. Alburé herself was resplendent in a gold-embroidered mid-blue gown – typically Kelvhan – but looked a little sad.

As one dance ended and the next prepared to start, Sashel stood up. Parthenal expected him to go over to Alburé, but instead Sashel walked up to the Princess Idria to request her hand. It was accepted prettily. Parthenal glanced at Huldarion; he saw a faint nod, and Aretor too stood up and went to ask one of the Kelvhan ladies for a dance.

So he supposed he had better do the same. But not a Kelvhan. After a moment he got up and walked over to ask Alburé. They were old friends, and he knew that she was suffering after the death of Sashel's twin in battle. He wondered whether to speak of Gordal but decided better not. The screechy instruments restarted and they spent the first round of the dance accustoming themselves to the steps in sober silence. Nearby Sashel was dancing with careful grace and with a smile: the Princess seemed to be at her ease. Alburé did not look at them.

"I trust you like it here in Kelvha," said Parthenal next time they turned together in the dance.

"I like it very much. A magnificent place, and my hosts are so kind." She had to say that: the conversation could not be private, and it would be bad manners for them to converse in Vonnish.

"You look very lovely tonight, Alburé." In response, her mouth turned up in a thin semblance of a smile. He felt for her. "I'm surprised the Kelvhan gentlemen aren't lining up to dance with you," he said, with more feeling.

"Well, they might, now that they've seen I don't actually have two left feet," she said, rousing herself a little before reverting to formality. "We ladies will have our own celebration soon in any case. The lady Meya has honoured us with an invitation to the castle: the ladies of Kelvha are to meet those of the Vonn."

"I'm sure that will be very pleasant. Will there be dancing?"

"Amongst the ladies? I have no idea."

"You will have to loan out some more dresses."

She gave him a glance which reminded him that the remark was on the border of acceptability. Probably over it. So he switched to commenting on the splendour of their surroundings – true enough – and was pleased to see her looking a little more like herself as she responded.

They made a handsome couple, Parthenal was perfectly aware: he knew that he danced well, and so did she. At the end of the dance he kissed Alburé's hand, as was expected: and then, looking down at her, he bent and kissed her on the brow. That was perhaps not expected but was done out of affection for her. Also it would not hurt for him to be seen kissing a woman.

Alburé's prediction was soon fulfilled: two Kelvhan noblemen came up to her, vying for the next dance. Parthenal was satisfied. He wondered whether to risk asking a Kelvhan lady next. But not many were free. Although Gaelera still had no partner, he was cautious about standing up with Nerogun's daughter. And another girl that Sashel had pointed out to him – Sina, the one who looked half-starved – met his enquiring glance with such unmistakeable alarm that he immediately turned away.

As he did so he noticed his equerry, Jaul, gazing at him with a certain look. Parthenal recognized that look. He did not gaze back, although he thought, *Ah, there's a man I'd dance with, were such things allowed.*

The idea made him smile. But he did not smile at Jaul; who, in any case, now had to step backwards as the fierce duellist with the eyebrows barged into him and then looked daggers down his nose, as if it were Jaul's fault. Although he felt a fleeting sympathy with his equerry, Parthenal took care not to pay too much attention. Instead he sat down again, pretending a casual interest in proceedings, while he watched Huldarion.

Huldarion was dancing now with an elderly woman who looked as if she could barely move beneath the weight of her red dress and her adornments: they equalled each other in stateliness. A sense of tiredness washed over Parthenal. He tapped his leg in time to the music and waited for it all to end.

When at last it did, he retired as swiftly as was courteous to his over-decorated chamber, wondering what he actually felt about Huldarion's marriage. He decided it was resignation. Listlessness. A sense of possibilities being over. As if the possibilities had ever been there at all...

He sat and pondered, and had not yet started to undress when he was startled to hear a low knock at his door.

It was Jaul, with a jug of hot water. This had not happened – Jaul attending to him personally – since his first night in the castle: a lesser servant had been delegated to the task. Parthenal did not take the jug but opened the door wider for Jaul to carry it in.

"I hope you enjoyed yourself this evening, My Lord Parthenal," Jaul said as he set the jug down. He sounded a little wistful.

"It was a pleasant occasion, thank you."

"You dance... very expertly. As expertly as you fight. I saw you in the combat against Dughin."

"Is he the man with the eyebrows?"

"He is a man feared in combat. It was most impressive. Do you do everything so well?"

Parthenal was taken aback. "I try to," he replied.

"The ladies looked most lovely this evening, did they not, my lord?"

"Indeed they did."



"I know of one or two ladies who would be glad to dance with you in private. Ladies not so noble as those present this evening, naturally, but more... accommodating."

Again he was taken aback. "I thank you, but I require no lady's company," he said.

"I admit I'm glad of it," said Jaul, relaxing into a disarming smile. "A girl you have never met before... you don't know what she will be like, do you? But if you change your mind, or if you decide that anything else appeals... I am always available."

The smile was inviting. There had been a faint emphasis on the *I*, small but unmistakable. And it did appeal. Huldarion would have his woman, after all.

But this was Kelvha. Such leanings were supposed to be forbidden. Could Jaul really mean what he had seemed to indicate? Parthenal made no immediately reply, but was simply staring at the man with a slight frown, when a second knock came at the door.

"Come in," he said automatically.

A round, anxious face appeared. It took Parthenal a few seconds to recognise the small official from the dusty archives: what was his name? Tamu. He was carrying a huge, antique-looking book in both arms.

"Ah," said Tamu apologetically, "my pardon for interrupting you, my lord, but I have found something which I thought you ought to see immediately. I would have brought this to the Lord Huldarion, but he is busy, and I recalled your name, and so – so I came here." He bustled in, giving them each a nervous half-bow and already beginning to open the heavy volume which had book-marks flapping from its ragged pages.

"What is it?" asked Parthenal, both bemused and amused. He did not know whether to be sorry or not for the interruption.

"At this hour?" said Jaul.

"It is late, I know, but I only thought of this particular book an hour ago," said Tamu, "that is to say, the Annals of Coleran, a work which, which, which though it is very much in the second league of historical importance, I am afraid, to say nothing of style, quite ungrammatical at times, does cover the relevant years of Garean's reign. Now this may be nothing after all, but it may be of significance. So I felt I had to bring it to you. May I?"

Without waiting for permission he deposited the vast book on the small table with a grunt and carefully opened it at one of the bookmarks. "Now then," he said.

"Will this take long?" said Jaul.

Tamu looked at him with timid surprise. "Lord Huldarion did ask for anything of importance to be reported immediately, sir," he said. "So that is what I am doing." He bent his head to the book. "Now, in the reign of Garean, in the year 22 of his august sovereignty, we find this missive from the chieftain Agor."

Jaul gave a small snort of impatience and looked at Parthenal enquiringly.

"You had better go," said Parthenal to him.

"I will call back later, in case there is anything you require."

"I don't think I'll require anything, thank you," said Tamu, using an eyeglass to peer at his book.

Jaul rolled his eyes at Parthenal, shook his head with a half-smile and went out.

"The year 22, let me see," said Tamu. "Ah, here we are. Now just read this." He pointed to the bookmark.

Parthenal read. On the bookmark was written in small, neat handwriting:

*Entrapment. Say nothing. Keep looking down. Spyhole in mosaic in wall opposite.*

Parthenal stopped breathing. He stopped moving. Although he immediately wanted to look up at the wall, he kept his head down. Tamu was chattering on:

"Now, as I said, we have this missive from the chieftain Agor, written to the king in an appeal for military support prior to the battle of Denj – which King Garean wisely declined. But see here, the reference to the dorchoile?"

Parthenal looked at the words and saw nothing. His head was whirling. Nothing was safe. Still he dared not even move. Luckily the nervous flood of Tamu's words filled any gap.

"Now, this I believe is the old term, current several centuries ago but since fallen into disuse, Dorchoile or its more recent variant Dorchill, meaning, I believe, the Darkburn. See the reference to the forest – and see below also, the description of its fearsome creatures scaled and clawed!"

He seemed to pause in triumph. Parthenal managed to say something which was both anodyne and true.

"I have difficulty in reading this old script."

"Of course," said Tamu. "I'm used to deciphering such works. I don't expect you can decide on its importance now, but I felt you ought to be made aware of it at once. I can't leave the book here, you understand, it is too valuable, but it will be at my desk in the Scriptorium at any time you and your colleagues care to look at it. I can make a transcription for you if that will help."

"Perhaps," said Parthenal, and then, gathering his wits, added, "Yes, certainly. Perhaps tomorrow. We need to look into this matter further. I am very grateful."

Tamu nodded, closed his book – concealing the bookmark – and gathered it up again in both arms. After another clumsy half-bow, not looking at Parthenal, he scuttled out of the room.

Parthenal closed the door behind him. He knew now what he had to do; which was to behave naturally.

Easier said than done. So quelling all urges to stare at the mosaic, he sat down on the bed for a few minutes looking thoughtful, which was not hard: for he was mentally going through what exactly he had said to Jaul before Tamu arrived. Nothing incriminating, he was sure. Then he stretched his shoulders in a yawn, pulled off his boots and surcoat and began to brush them down.

He had almost finished when there was a third knock at the door. Before he could open it, Jaul had let himself in.

"Little Tamu gets carried away with his job," he said with a smile which no longer looked so appealing to Parthenal.

"Certainly he seems very conscientious," he answered coolly.

"Oh, he's very single-minded. One might even say simple-minded. Is there any further service you require?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Really? Anything is available, my lord Parthenal." He seemed to linger on the name. "Anything at all. You have but to say the word."

"Nothing more, I thank you." He nodded to Jaul and turned to fold up his surcoat. He was aware that his heart was thumping.

He heard Jaul hesitate for a long moment before leaving the room. He glanced up briefly at the closed door, then went to the bathroom and washed in the warm water from the jug. When he returned he still took care not to look for more than an instant at the wall opposite. That instant told him nothing. So intricate and busy was the mosaic that any spyhole would be impossible to discern at a mere glance.

But what now? What did he usually do before he went to bed?

One thing he could do. It was a frequent task, and although it was not normally one he undertook last thing at night, it would not hurt to remind any watchers of just who he was and how he was armed. So he unsheathed his sword and looked up and down the blade for any sign of rust, or scratches that might encourage rust.

Then he oiled it carefully with the rag he kept for the purpose, before choosing a few strokes from his usual drill, controlling the hissing blade in its moves through the air. Its weight in his hand had the reassurance of familiarity. The act gave him the reassurance of his own skill. He finished by holding the sword upright, both hands on the hilt, the flat side of the blade against his forehead. He closed his eyes and silently vowed fealty to Huldarion.

Then, calmed, he sheathed the sword and placed it on the floor beside his bed. He locked the door and pulled off his outer garments; lay down, rearranged the bedclothes around him and snuffed out the lamp.

And there, in the opposite wall, a small round point of light still shone for half a second before it too was hastily snuffed out.

## **Chapter 12**

"You're quite sure about the light?" asked Huldarion.

"I'm certain. I felt for my sword in the dark and pointed it in that direction," said Parthenal. "When I looked this morning I was able to find the spyhole without making it obvious that I was searching for it. There is a hole drilled in the mosaic, about four feet above the ground. The wall seems thick, so I don't think the visibility through it can be good. Much of the room would be obscured. But the bed would probably be fully visible."

"I'd like to know who's in that next room," said Rothir.

"So would I. But there's no door to it that I can see. It must be entered from a different passage: however, I don't want to go hunting for it."

"No, you should not do that," agreed Huldarion. He wondered why he wasn't more surprised. But after the trap – possible trap – laid for Veron in the public combat, Huldarion found himself meeting this news of a private trap with weary resignation. His main thought was: does Meya know?

"Then other rooms could have such spyholes too," observed Rothir. The three of them were talking in Rothir's lodgings outside the castle. Although there was no reason to think this place was watched, Rothir and Parthenal had carefully checked the walls before summoning Huldarion, just in case.

"They may indeed. But; you see, I think I was put in that particular room for a purpose," said Parthenal with slight difficulty. "Jaul seems to have guessed my inclinations. I'm sure I gave him no indication by word or look. But he did offer me first women, and then... alternatives. Possibly himself, I think."

"If you had succumbed," said Rothir, "then at some point a senior lord would have burst into the room in outrage."

"Several lords," said Huldarion. "Multiple witnesses. Were you likely to succumb?"

After a moment's pause, Parthenal admitted, "I was tempted."

Huldarion felt exasperation. Why couldn't the man keep his breeches on? I've managed to restrain myself these last nine years, he thought. Couldn't Parthenal have coped with even one month's celibacy?

But Parthenal had not succumbed. And he was an honest man. One of the best, not just on the battlefield. I love him, thought Huldarion, despite his casual insouciance; and instead of giving vent to his irritation he put a reassuring hand on Parthenal's shoulder.

"You will not be tempted again," he said, "not here."

"What about the archivist, Tamu?" growled Rothir. "How far can we trust him? Is he looking for leverage?"

"I don't know if he acted alone," said Parthenal, "although I'd be inclined to think he did. He was obviously nervous, but I suspect that is his normal state."

"He's not from Kelvha, is he?" said Huldarion. "It's possible he knows the ways of the castle and simply doesn't care for them. He may not be averse to a little revenge. When we visited the archives, Nerogun didn't exactly treat him with respect."

"Tamu told me to come to the scriptorium to see the book."

"Then we will do that. Whether the book is truly relevant, or was simply an excuse, it means he must have something else to tell us. But we will keep this incident between the three of us," said Huldarion, "until we have learnt more."

"We?" asked Rothir.

Huldarion studied him consideringly. Rothir looked completely back to normal now, apart from the long gash along his forehead.

"You've won yourself renown within the castle with that fight," he said. "How do you feel?"

"I feel all right."

"Then, yes, *we*. You may come with us into the castle, Rothir. But let me ask the questions." He was still annoyed over the matter of the darkburn; yet he appreciated Rothir's courage, and was relieved to see him recovered. Rothir had always been his friend – for twenty years and more had been a companion in play, in travel, and in battle – which meant that Huldarion was finding it hard to adjust to the correct kingly distance. He wished no distance was necessary; but if he did not make the hierarchy plain, the Kelvhans would have no faith in his authority.

However, it would be politic now to show his approval of Rothir the valiant tiger-killer – as long as it was clear who was the master.

The three of them re-entered the castle and rather than delay walked straight over to the archives. Seeing the Keeper of the Keys as they crossed the great paved yard, Huldarion greeted him with a nod of the head – no bow, he decided, for Melegan is my equal – and said,

"We have received a message from the archivist about a matter that requires our attention. I trust there is no obstacle to our visiting him?"

"None at all, my Lord," said Melegan courteously; though with a hint of surprise and curiosity that made Huldarion sure that Melegan, at least, knew nothing about Tamu's message. So he had not been party to the spying through the wall, although as Keeper of the Keys he had access to all parts of the castle. But so, presumably, did others.

When they entered the low, lopsided building that held the archives, he noticed Rothir look round in amazement at the rows of shelves stuffed closely with tight scrolls and folded parchments. Huldarion himself thought the place no rival for Caervonn's great, vaulted, echoing library with its thousands of rare books. If they still existed... He repressed a sigh.

That enticing odour of old leather. The smell of age and learning. They passed the desks of hunched scribes and the sounds of diligent scratchings, to reach Tamu's desk at the centre.

It appeared to have no privacy, Huldarion noted: for it was open to view from all the surrounding desks. Despite this, he quickly realised that it could be a sufficiently private place to talk. The piles of books and papers all around it seemed to catch and muffle sounds. Once he stood by the desk he could no longer hear the scraping pens. Unless they spoke loudly, the Riders were unlikely to be overheard.

And Tamu did, at first, speak loudly. He greeted them without surprise and without much ceremony.

"My Lord Huldarion. Welcome. You'll want to see that chronicle about the chieftain Agor," he said. "I have it here, ready: and I'm in the middle of writing out the transcript." A large volume was already open on the desk. Tamu turned it round and the three Riders bent over to examine it. Huldarion could barely read a word of the crabbed script.

Parthenal asked Tamu in an undertone, "Why did you come last night?" It was an innocent enough question and allowed for an innocent answer should that be necessary.

But Tamu said quietly, almost with a shrug, "Well, they have used Jaul to entrap visitors before. I expect I need not spell out how."

"No. But why did Jaul pick me?" Even Huldarion could barely hear Parthenal's question, although he could still detect the strain in his low voice.

This time the archivist did not answer straight away. Instead he leant over the book and pointed to one line, raising his voice for a moment.

"And there, you see another reference to Agor's enemy. The Dorchoile lurking in the forest: that could mean the darkburn. Or something similar at least." He lowered his voice again to murmur, "We cannot be overheard here unless we speak too loud. They will frequently test newcomers that way. It's hard to say why you were chosen. But Jaul has... a reputation. Sometimes I think he simply picks the best-looking man of a group to see how far he can get with him. That may have been the case with you." He was carefully not looking at Parthenal but turned a great page of his book with an abstracted frown.

"He offered me a woman," said Parthenal. "Would that have compromised me?"

"Hardly. Nobody would care. Now then, let us look at this page also. Because you never know who is watching."

They looked. Tamu read out, in a high, nervous voice, a few lines from his transcription. Huldarion listened. If this was a reference to a darkburn – this spirit that set fire to the woods – it was a very ancient and poetic one. He was doubtful. Nobody said anything until Rothir quietly asked, "Why did you intervene?"

Tamu blew out his cheeks, and shuffled various sheets around on his desk until he found a pen.

"I don't like their methods," he said at last. "Let me just write something down for you."

He took a clean sheet of paper. In a small, neat script he wrote:

*All bedrooms lowest floor east wing. Most rooms first floor south tower, and second floor north tower. Chart room. Small council room. Blue receiving room. Probably others.*  
Underneath the words he drew an eye.

"How do you know this?" said Huldarion.

"Rumour. And old records from the rebuilding of the castle. But of course they are probably out of date. Now then: the Dorchoile. I will give you the transcription as far as I have completed it. When I have done the rest, who shall I bring it to?"

This was spoken more loudly, and Huldarion answered in an equally clear voice.

"To me, if you please. May I take this with me now?" He rolled up the transcription with the smaller sheet of paper wrapped inside it. There were formal bows all round. Then they turned and left the little archivist busying himself once more at his desk.

"Well," said Huldarion, as they passed the copyists, "what do you think?"

"It could be useful information," answered Rothir. "Although I'm not sure about the significance of those references to the darkburn."

"No. But worth following up. I shall have a look at this." He tapped the scroll beneath his arm. Once they were outside he said, "The most useful information we have gained is that we are being spied on; and that we can never be sure exactly where. As Tamu said, that list is unlikely to be comprehensive. So we must act as if every room has its spyhole."

As he spoke, Huldarion felt a slight nausea. Every room? His own bedchamber? It was in the east wing, on the lowest floor. What about Meya's?

His mind had immediately flown ahead to the consummation prior to his marriage: he did not yet know when and where it would take place. He was unsure how to make the arrangements. Yet it was most important to him that it should go well, for personal as well as diplomatic reasons.

He had enough to worry about, without spyholes. His scars, for a start. They need not affect his own performance, he knew that at least; for nine years ago, seeking reassurance, he had had a brief liaison with a woman – a tall, cool, solitary potter. He'd explained the situation: and she had given him the trial and knowledge that he needed. He remembered her hands upon his maimed body, sure and steady, as if he were her clay.

But she had not been going to marry him. Meya's situation was more involved. He already had confused emotions about the event, and he did not like confusion. The knowledge of spyholes around the castle added greatly to his unease.

"Well, they did not succeed with you," he said to Parthenal as they crossed the yard. "That's the main thing. Jaul must have thought it worth a trial, as the archivist suggested, just in case."

He noticed Rothir glance at Parthenal, who said, somewhat awkwardly,

"Perhaps so. But he may have known. There was a soldier the week before we came here. A Kelvhan. I thought it strange at the time that he was so abrupt. But now..."

"I see," said Huldarion drily. "Not necessarily just chance, then. But that will make you doubly careful."

"It makes me glad I'm not lodging in the castle," said Rothir.

"None the less," Huldarion said, "you should still assume that you too may be spied on, at any time." He stopped and turned to finish addressing them before they got too close to the castle buildings. "So speak no word against Kelvha. Do nothing that could be construed as treating them with dishonour or contempt. Nothing that could be used against us. Although it may not feel like it, our little friend in the archives has done us a great service. We should take heed."

## Chapter 13

Tamu had never seen a man so beautiful as Parthenal.

When the Vonn had first ridden into the castle, all the servants and officials had put down their tasks to go outside and stare. In fact they had been commanded to, in order to swell the welcoming crowd.

The seven Riders were impressive. As they entered behind the Kelvhan escort, they seemed to be not as self-consciously proud as their hosts, and their gear was far less rich; but they had a look of steady resolve and intelligence and strength. The other watchers close to him were all commenting on their chief, Huldarion – that stern scarred face – so Tamu murmured about him likewise, yet was staring at the others. Three of them were very handsome: one in particular, who was darker than the other two. He had, thought Tamu, the face and bearing of an angel, of a god. It was as if some bygone knight had stepped out of the old tales to ride into the castle.

The man turned his head to gaze across the crowd. His gaze seemed to brush past Tamu, alighting briefly on the man next to him, a blond young gardener. And some feather turned in Tamu's chest, some wing unfolded.

He began to walk with the crowd that gathered behind the Riders. As a castle employee he was allowed into the inner courtyard, where he stood at the back and watched them all dismount. The man he had admired was the tallest of the group. He stood by his horse and looked about him with cool curiosity, with an acute gaze in which there was a hint of judgement and a hint of humour.

All this Tamu read in twenty or so seconds. He did not ask anyone the Rider's name: that would not have been safe. But as he walked to the Scriptorium the wing inside his chest grew wider and beat its feathers in a way that made him breathless.

Some hours later the seven Riders of the Vonn were brought to the Scriptorium, and Tamu was introduced to them. Nerogun's presence was enough to ensure that he was as nervous and bumbling as he had ever been. When he knocked over his pen-stand and dropped his papers, he heard Nerogun murmur some derogatory joke. He managed to gather himself sufficiently to play his part as archivist: to nod and frown as he tried to understand what it was that the Riders wanted. Indeed he immediately grasped it and was mentally listing all the places he could look.

The tall man's presence added to his nervousness. But he looked attentively at Tamu; he picked up the fallen paper: and he smiled. Tamu knew the smile meant nothing – it was politeness, civil kindness. All the same the wing inside his chest beat harder.

And the leader spoke the tall man's name. Parthenal. Once they had all gone, Tamu said the word silently to himself, over and over. *Parthenal*. Such a soft, sweet whisper of a word for such a strong, hard-looking man.

He had admired men before. But this was different. This was so much bigger. Tamu set to work assiduously hunting out any reference to darkburns in the archives, because that was all that he could do for Parthenal. Perhaps he might earn another smile. For the next few days he caught only rare and fleeting glimpses of the Rider as he moved around the castle; but Parthenal was always in his mind.

He gave nothing away to the scribes who sat around him. The long years of practice at dissembling came to his aid: that, and the knowledge of what would happen if anybody guessed the nature of his thoughts.



Tamu had learned the rules of the castle very quickly. For he had nearly been caught out ten years ago, soon after his arrival here: a quiet, bookish young man from the southern provinces, looking for employment. At first he had been put to work in the kitchens, but when the exasperated head cook discovered him reading the recipe books and correcting the spelling of ingredients, he was sent to the Archives as a trainee scribe.

He had hardly as yet spoken a word to anyone, so he was surprised one evening soon afterwards to be approached and propositioned by a palace footman. How could he have known? And the man so clearly did not fancy him that the proposition left Tamu gaping dumbly like a fish.

The footman took his surprise for indignation, laughed, and then explained.

"No offence. It's castle policy to weed out any perverts. If you'd said Yes, you'd have been either kicked out or thrown off the Tell Tower – depending on who you are, and how his lordship's feeling."

"Quite right too," said Tamu. "Which Lordship would that be?"

The footman cocked his head towards West Fort and mouthed "Nerogun." By which Tamu gathered that nowhere was it safe to speak openly, even for Nerogun's own agents; and having a quick and active imagination he at once understood the nature of the place he found himself in.

From that day he began to cultivate the persona that was in fact based on his own. In another, more congenial place he thought he would have been an absent-minded scholar; but he would not have become so abstracted, so bumbling and apologetic, so wrapped up in the Archives that he was seen as laughably unworldly in any other sphere. Although it kept him safe, Tamu regretted it; and he was lonely.

The more he learnt about the castle, with its labyrinthine passages and politics, its secrets and its spyholes, the less he liked it. Yet he could not afford to leave, because he was paid well – especially as he rose in the Scriptorium's ranks – and his mother back home relied on what he sent her. But books were now his chief and safest friends.

Although the works in the Scriptorium were mainly genealogies and histories, they opened up a world of other lives: the tales of exploration, conflict and endeavour that he read within the chronicles stirred and strengthened his imagination. He lived his life within those ancient pages, falling in love with this heroic long-dead knight or that.

And he progressed. From clerk to senior scribe to assistant deputy; for he was clever and industrious and unlike many of the scribes was interested in his work. The shaky old archivist Jorgrid noticed Tamu's interest, and became something of a mentor if not quite a friend. When Jorgrid died suddenly – slumping at his desk – Tamu was grieved, although not much surprised; what surprised him a great deal more was his own promotion to chief archivist.

The post should have gone to Elgur, the man whose junior he was. When the Arch-Lord Welgun, the Keeper of the Scrolls, made an appearance at the archives, he assumed that Elgur's appointment would be a mere formality.

But Nerogun turned up too, and he asked the questions. How do you see the future of the archives? What changes need to be made?

Encouraged, Elgur was full of ideas which he expounded with enthusiasm. The archives could be extended to include scripts from outside Kelvha – new ideas, modern thinkers. The genealogies could perhaps be weeded in order to accommodate these new works; they took up vast amounts of space, and needed weeding anyway. Certain members of the lower orders could be allowed access to some of the collection.

Throughout all this Nerogun nodded and made no comment. Then he turned to Tamu. "And what would you advise?" he asked.

Although Tamu had his own ideas about the archives, which tallied in some ways with Elgur's, he did not want to simply repeat what his senior colleague had just said. Indeed he saw some danger in doing so, for the Keeper of the Scrolls was frowning. So he coughed and stammered, "I would be guided by the Arch-Lord Welgun."

"And?" said Nerogun. "What else? How would you manage the genealogies?"

"Well, more, more, more space is certainly required," said Tamu nervously. "Perhaps the annexe – if it, if it were re-roofed – it would not do for any of the parchments to get damp..."

Elgur shook his head. "If you start to move the genealogies on that scale, you'd have to re-index them all," he objected. "It would be a massive job. It would leave no time for anything else."

"A new catalogue would be required," admitted Tamu.

"Would that be difficult?" enquired Nerogun.

"It would certainly be very time-consuming," said Tamu.

Nerogun nodded and led the Arch-Lord Welgun out. A week later, Elgur was moved to a clerical post in Outer Kelvha, and Tamu became Chief Archivist of Kelvha Castle.

The annexe was re-roofed. The genealogies were still being catalogued as they were moved, shelf by weary shelf: Tamu did that job meticulously although the genealogies meant nothing to him. His love was for the ancient chronicles and histories – the spidery scripts, the crossings and corrections, the little pictures in the margins; all were a dialogue with a friendly past. He sought out old manuscripts in the City's second-hand shops, and sometimes wished that he could procure more recent works to add to the collection. But that would have to wait. Perhaps once Faldron was High King.

As for his daily life in Kelvha castle... mundane was the best word. He formed a few polite acquaintanceships with other officials of his rank; they talked mostly about books. Occasionally he harboured a small, secret passion for a stable-boy or clerk, or daringly, for some tall, handsome lordling. Not a sigh or an untoward glance had ever escaped him: his sighs he kept for when he was alone in bed.

None of these passions meant a great deal to him except in the fact that they were impossible. Were he ever to really feel love, for a real person, he knew that it could never come to anything. Even if Kelvha were different, it would come to nothing, because who would ever want him? There had been one boy back home... but he had soon lost interest. Even the footman hadn't been able to pretend to want him.

And now had come the Vonn.

Although he didn't care for jousts, all the minor officials were expected to attend. Tamu thought he might catch some distant glimpse of Parthenal up on the dais. That was all that he dared hope for. The hand to hand combats came as a shock to him: as first one, and then another of the Riders of the Vonn stood up, and he realised that Parthenal's turn might well come next, his heart beat so hard and wildly that he could barely hide his agitation.

And then it was Dughin, of all men, whom Parthenal finally stood up against: a fierce, notorious man, permanently angry. The combat had been horrific – yet beautiful, marvellous. The way that Parthenal moved as he fought, the long lines of his limbs, his controlled strength, his skill, all left Tamu breathless and shaken. He was conscious that the wing inside his chest had grown. It had become a bird, huge and wonderful, some swan or soaring eagle, beating, beating to be let out.

Nobody noticed, because nobody ever did notice him. But he noticed one of them. He noticed Jaul.

Tamu knew of Jaul: he was aware that he performed the same function as that footman had, ten years ago, although Jaul moved only among the higher ranks. Tamu had heard mutters about him in the Scriptorium, and had been very careful to avoid Jaul's eye.

But now, after the combat, he saw Jaul walk smiling up to Parthenal. So Jaul was his equerry. As he realised this, Tamu felt terrible alarm and fear. He thought it unlikely that Parthenal loved other men – that would have been too much to hope for – but a man like Jaul might succeed in entrapping him by some means anyway. He knew that spyholes were dotted round the castle: and feared lest somehow Jaul succeed in compromising Parthenal.

During the subsequent contest with the tiger, Tamu oohed and aahed along with all the others in the audience. But he barely noticed what was happening in the arena; the danger of it did not register with him. All he could think of was the danger that Parthenal was in, unknowingly. A fever of apprehension boiled up inside him. He needed to warn Parthenal.

After the tournament he summoned up the courage to ask a lower servant which was Parthenal's room, pretending he had a message to take him. The answer – second lower left, fourth turn, North Tower – confirmed all his fears. There was a spyhole there.

But Tamu did not go there straight away. He did not dare. It would have to be managed very carefully.

Yet he knew there was a way to do it. Gathering up his courage he forced himself to plan. Back in the shelter of the Archives, he retrieved the Chronicles of Garean which he had already searched through and had begun to transcribe for the Vonn. He could use this as an excuse to talk to Parthenal. He wrote a message warning of entrapment, and hid it deep within the book.

What would he say when he spoke to Parthenal? It had to seem quite innocent. He made himself work it all out in his head, as if he was deciphering an ancient script. As he silently rehearsed it, he was terrified, but knew his terror would not matter as he always appeared so nervous anyway. It was a dreadful risk, but he would risk anything, oh, anything, to safeguard Parthenal.

Yet still he could not do it. He lurked at the entrance to the North Tower, clutching his huge book, and could not summon up the boldness to walk upstairs to the room and knock. He had known that he would fail. A lowly, anxious, unregarded man like him was bound to fail. Despising himself, he was about to retreat before any passing lord could wonder why he was lingering there, when he glimpsed Jaul, carrying a jug across the courtyard.

Jaul did not notice him. Tamu was able to follow at a safe distance: and he saw Jaul mount the stairs. He followed him, two bends behind. From the corner of the corridor he watched Jaul knock on Parthenal's door and after a moment enter the room, closing the door behind him.

Now Tamu was desperate. He dared not do this. But he had to. He wanted to run away. But he must not. So he rehearsed his words again, and grasped his heavy book: and then he knocked, and bumped in, and although he forgot half the words he had rehearsed it didn't really matter. He bumped so effectively that Jaul soon left. He dared not look at Parthenal. But he had given him the message.

He hoped that he had shown no hint of how he felt. The next day he had coped a little better, when Parthenal came into the Scriptorium with his scarred chief and the tiger-killer. Being on his own ground gave Tamu more confidence. It would be dreadful if Parthenal had guessed. But he was fairly sure that Parthenal did not guess. He did not really notice Tamu; nobody did. He noticed the words that Tamu spoke, but Tamu thought that he himself remained a cipher.

Yet still the wing in Tamu's breast beat hard. He knew that he would have to carry this beating wing inside him all his life. It was terrible and painful: it was wonderful.

And somehow, after all, despite his lack of courage, he had managed it. Parthenal was safe.

## **Chapter 14**

When Meya left her room late in the evening, she knew that she was being followed. Nerogun didn't usually bother setting spies on her: he had no interest in what happened in the kitchens or how she supervised the maidservants. But now, since her second meeting with Huldarion, things were different.

She was well aware of who and where the spies might be. Supervising the servants had its advantages, and she was good at pretending not to overhear. That footman busy trimming lamps along the purple corridor was there for a reason.

Well, she was only doing what was expected – even if the bride-to-be wasn't normally the one expected to initiate it. The Post-Regent could hardly complain when it was reported back to him that she had visited Huldarion's quarters.

If it had been his daughter whom Huldarion had chosen, she wondered, would Nerogun have set his spies on her? Though Meya couldn't imagine Gaelera in anybody's bed. And none of the other women would have taken the initiative as she herself was now doing; except perhaps Janeya. For an intelligent girl, Janeya was independently minded – too independently, especially on that one disastrous point...

Meya sighed and turned her mind back to Huldarion. She had briefly pondered how far down his body the scars extended. Not that it bothered her, except in how it might affect his comfort: her late husband had been badly scarred down one leg from a wound in battle. Inigun had been a reticent, stiff, proper man who came most fully alive when discussing military history with her father, the great General Borovin. She had respected Inigun but had not loved him. She had thought that she would never love, until her daughter changed her mind. Aliya filled her heart.

She did not expect that any man might come to do the same. If she could respect Huldarion, that would be sufficient for her. At least he had no airs and graces, and spoke well enough. That was as much as she could tell. That, and a fleeting attempt at a kind smile. He was said to be stern and strong in battle, but weren't they all?

The Vonn had ancient lineage. That mattered to her, but less than the fact that marriage to Huldarion would give her some self-determination. It would mean that Aliya, living in the country, as was the norm for the young children of the castle, would never have to come back to this place. Meya had survived her life in Kelvha Castle relatively unscathed, thanks to her father's status and her own thick skin; but she was aware that many girls did not.

But she was still surprised that Huldarion had offered for her. Now she wanted to make sure of him before he could change his mind. Hence tonight's walk through the castle to his rooms: the pre-nuptial consummation would happen sooner rather than later. She would make sure that Huldarion enjoyed himself. She would bind him to her. She knew she had the advantage over the younger girls in experience, if in little else, and was confident that she could please him unless he had very wayward tastes. Although she felt some nervousness, she told herself that it was only natural, and therefore irrelevant. Ignore it and do what was necessary.

Now she nodded to the guards outside his door and said majestically, "Announce me, please."

She was duly announced. Huldarion sat in his sumptuous quarters alone, reading a document by lamplight. He put it down upon the table and stood up to greet her. He showed no surprise although he could not have anticipated this.

She gave him a deep curtsy and he bowed. The men left and closed the door.

"My Lady Meya," he said. "What can I do for you?"

She was slightly thrown out. Surely he could guess? Matters must have been explained to him even if he had not expected her to appear tonight. With a heart-thud of apprehension she prayed that he would not turn her away.

"I thought you might like some company," she said with a smile.

"Your company is always welcome."

He did not invite her to sit down. Instead he walked over to her and took her hand to kiss it. Then he moved in to kiss her face.

Fast work, she thought, taken aback. But he whispered close to her ear, "Are we watched?"

He knew, then. How had he found out? "Almost certainly," she murmured.

"Where from?"

"Above the bed." She did not glance up at the ornately carved wooden ceiling, but she knew the spyholes were there. Two of them. The room above was, in theory, merely for linen storage: but her housekeeping duties had allowed her to surreptitiously explore there as well as in many other places.

He bent his head as if to nuzzle at her neck.

"And are we listened to?"

"Not so much. If we speak quietly we cannot be heard. Only loud voices will be audible."

He stepped back from her, still holding her hand. "Do you know if any other of my Riders will have been spied on?" His voice was so low that she could only just make it out.

She hesitated, wondering how much to say. It occurred to her that Huldarion might well have his own spies here, possibly of long standing, for the Vonn were not entirely new to Kelvha. There was that harsh-featured woman staying in Melegan's house: she had some connection to the Vonn, did she not? And Melegan would know about the spyholes, although he would be unlikely to authorise their use. That was most likely to be done only by Nerogun; it would be very rash for anyone to use them without the Post-Regent's permission.

But since Huldarion knew about them, there was no point in prevaricating. Best to tell the truth. "Not to my knowledge," she murmured. "But my knowledge is very limited. I have no say in such matters and would not be told."

"But you think it likely?"

"Yes. I think it certain." As she spoke she had a disconcerting sense of stepping aside from Kelvha; of a distance opening up between her homeland and herself.

Huldarion did not seem to be annoyed. Despite the scar his face seemed alive with interest. Maybe it was just the flickering lamplight. He turned and snuffed out the lamp upon the table, leaving only the one beside the bed.

"Shall I escort you?" He led her to the bed. This was all happening very fast. Her heart was thumping again. She had expected more preamble.

"I appreciate your coming here," he said, speaking more loudly and clearly now. "I was unsure how to ask you. I imagine that, like me, you see no advantage in waiting."

"You are right." Any flowery attempt at wooing would have repelled her, given the circumstances. This was a marriage of convenience, and she needed no pretence at romance.

All the same she had expected some pretence. She did not know quite what to make of this practical approach. Would he be as quick and taciturn as her husband had always been? Was this merely a formality for him? She would see to it that it wasn't. She would make it memorable.

But she didn't care for the idea of being watched, and had been relying on the bedclothes to cover her. Now she eyed the heavy embroidered bedcover with dismay. She hadn't realised that this regal counterpane had been unearthed from some dusty trunk and laid upon the bed. With that weighing down on top of her, she would barely be able to move, let alone do what she had planned.

"I prefer darkness," said Huldarion. "May I shield the light?"

"Please do."

He rotated a shield on the lantern by the bed so that only the wall was lit, and that by the mere faintest glimmer. He must have brought the lantern with him. It showed a disconcerting foresight. There was just enough light for her to see where he was, but little detail could be discerned.

"Is that all right for you?"

"Yes, I thank you." Nevertheless she was slightly put out. Now there was no point in the graceful partial undressing she had designed; but on second thoughts she was glad not to be performing it for Nerogun or whatever watchers he had installed. So in the dark she pulled off the minimum of clothing without ceremony, leaving her petticoat on.

He was without ceremony too. When he approached her again she could just see that he was fully naked.

"One thing I must ask," he said very quietly. "Do you fear becoming pregnant? Because I can take that into account."

She was surprised at his frankness, but decided to answer in the same spirit. "I do not fear it. I have access to callaret."

"I wasn't sure if it was available to the ladies of the castle."

"It is to me," said Meya. She had long ago befriended the herb-mistress – a low-born but knowledgeable woman – and made sure that callaret was provided to the chambermaids who might not get a choice about being bedded if a nobleman took a fancy to them. That was the way of the castle: Meya did not like it, but she could not change it.

"Good. Then, what is your preference for these proceedings?" he murmured. "I do not wish to do anything that you would not like." He had good manners, that was something; although she placed no reliance on his sincerity.

"Why don't you just lie back on the bed?" she suggested.

So he threw back the embroidered bedcover and lay down, and when she discovered that he was ready – one job less for her, at least – she manoeuvred herself on top of him, sitting straight and upright. She didn't need the covers to conceal her after all, thankfully, since the room was in near-darkness.

This was what she had planned beforehand, although she had never tried it this way with her husband, who would have been appalled at the idea. Being on top was something prostitutes did, by all accounts: again she was indebted to the kitchen staff for their unwitting revelations. It was apparently supposed to be a great treat for the man although she couldn't imagine why. It seemed bizarre to her that a woman could only go on top if the man was paying her; until reflection told her that it was probably a clever ploy by the prostitutes to make sure that they stayed in control. That was its advantage for her too – along with the assumption that it might mean less pressure on Huldarion's scars.

"I hope this is comfortable for you," she said. She didn't want him yelping with pain half way through.

"That is very pleasant for me, thank you." His hands were on her hips. She was conscious of how wide those hips were, but then thought, who cares? My body has served me well, and will again.

She sighed long and low as if it gave her pleasure too. Women weren't supposed to enjoy the act of love, but they were supposed to pretend to. Placing her hands upon his chest, she unexpectedly felt the scarring. But she kept her presence of mind and behaved as if it wasn't there. As she ran her hands up and down his torso, which was lean and muscled, she found that the scarred tissue extended all down one side. Possibly past his hip and down his left leg as well, although she wasn't about to get off to investigate.

Instead she began to move a little faster, still sighing from time to time as a signal of enjoyment. In fact she felt almost nothing at all, and had not expected to. Anything she did feel, she ignored. This was business. A task to be done. Let's make it quick, she thought, and moved and sighed a little faster.

But he said, "Wait a minute." She paused, and he undid the ribbon lacing of her petticoat bodice and pulled it down to her waist. Then he began gently to caress her breast. Meya was annoyed, because now she did feel something, and it was slightly harder to ignore. She had not intended to feel any pleasure. Her husband had never given her any, and this man was no different. It wasn't as if it would lead to anything but frustration.

So she moved again until she felt him grip her hips and push; and he was done. Good. She waited a decent amount of time before she lifted herself off and lay down beside him, on the unscarred side so that she would not embarrass him. It would not do to run away too fast. And he might want to do it a second time. That was all right. She could put up with that if necessary.

"That was remarkably pleasant," he said, so loudly that it could only be for the benefit of any listeners. "Lady Meya, you are a beautiful woman."

"Thank you," she said, although she was thinking, *Hah! one in the eye for you, Nerogun*. For only that morning the Post-Regent had commented to her with a sneer, "It seems he likes his women well-upholstered." She had calmly replied, "If by that you mean shapely, my lord, then I am sure that you are right."

So she appreciated Huldarion's remark, and as a reward even offered him a kiss, which he took but did not exploit. His hand was on her breast again now, caressing it in a way which seemed to be intended as much for her pleasure as his own. She began to wish he wouldn't. It was creating more of those sensations which she did not wish to have.

"Tell me if I do anything you do not like," he said, very quietly again. "Perhaps better not to shout *stop*. But you could exclaim *Oh, sir!* and I will get the message."

That made her almost laugh, so that she relaxed a little. She rehearsed "*Oh, sir!*" in her head but did not say it.

The caresses continued. After a little while he raised himself on one elbow.

"Allow me to make you more comfortable," he said, and moved her without apparent effort towards the centre of the bed. Then he removed her petticoat entirely, and began to gently kiss her breasts.

Here we go, thought Meya. Second time around. She had prepared herself to take his weight when she realised that instead of moving upward his mouth was moving downward.

It took her a moment to understand what he was doing. Her husband had never done this. If any noble husbands did, their wives kept very quiet about it, although she had heard such things mentioned by the scullery maids. She drew in her breath sharply; but then thought, if this made him happy, let him do it. So she refrained from saying "Oh, sir!"

But she could not refrain from everything. He was very careful, very deliberate, and after a while she realised what was going to happen. It had only ever happened when she was alone, and had always seemed half-finished. It had never happened with her husband.



So she decided to go along with it, since he seemed to like it, and there was no denying that she liked it too, very much now, it was like being carried down a river, through the rapids, faster and faster, to the point where she took his head in her hands – that scar again, it didn't matter – and then gripped his hand and placed it where she wanted on her breast. And the river hurtled over some cliff in a long shower of light and ended up in the sea.

She lay back gasping and smiled at her own analogy. But it was better than thinking about the man between her thighs, about the nature of the political transaction being sealed by their bodies. He raised himself again and rested on his elbows over her.

"May I?" he said.

"Of course." It was part of the transaction. Again he was very deliberate, very careful, and as he entered her body seemed to be positioning himself in a particular way. Which worked. As she felt him move she realised with a leap of joyous panic that the river had not lost itself in the sea at all, it was still there, still flowing through her but more strongly, deeper now, or rather that the sea was in her and was with her, flooding in a great unstoppable tide that filled her senses up and flowed right through her and washed her over, down and over and left her floating in some great green ocean, rocking her gently towards a shore. When she opened her eyes to the dark she could not remember where she was.

"Your body feels wonderful," said Huldarion quietly. She remembered *him*. "It has been a long time for me. But that was like a homecoming. Thank you."

"Thank *you*," she said, automatically.

"I'm glad you didn't say, *Oh sir*."

"So am I." For a while she lay next to his scarred side and traced the full length of the tightened skin with her fingers. It continued down his thigh. She felt quite relaxed: almost weak. She thought she wouldn't mind doing it again.

"We had probably better stop there," said Huldarion, "or Nerogun will think we are enjoying ourselves too much."

She nodded. "I suppose that will do for now." Then she wondered at herself, already contemplating when that tide might come again and wash her away.

In a louder voice, he announced, "I look forward to my next time with you, my Lady Meya, very much."

"Oh, *sir*!" she said, and then could not help a stifled giggle.

"Let me help you on with your petticoat," he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice too. Yet once she was clothed sufficiently for him to unshield the lamp again, the smile could not be seen on his still face.

She felt self-conscious as she finished dressing in the lamplight. He was wearing some embroidered dressing-gown covered in the Kelvhan insignia. It was a hideous thing and she made a mental vow to get it thrown out and replaced.

He bent and kissed her hand: now he was once more the formal, stern, impassive Huldarion that she had first seen on his arrival at the castle. She curtsied equally formally and after checking her dress stalked out of the door, imperiously ignoring the guards. She sensed the follower somewhere behind her and ignored him too. She was careful to betray no emotion in her walk. Although she was tempted to give a little skip and jump, her enjoyment was not something that she wanted Nerogun to know about.

But she was content in mind, and very content in her body, which seemed still to tremble and throb in memory, like the long slow ripples in a pool.

Forget her body. That was not important. She had fulfilled her task; and had fulfilled it well. She had achieved what she had planned.

And so had Huldarion. She almost stopped in mid-stride for a moment, as she realised what he had just done. Deliberately and carefully, he had bound her to him, so that she would not consider trying to escape.

## **Chapter 15**

Yaret woke abruptly, convinced that she was back at home in Obandiro. She was down in the cold cellar with the children who had survived the fires. One of them was having a nightmare. Dil most probably, that lonely, optimistic nine-year-old; he often did.

But no. She was not lying on a chilly floor, but somewhere warm, covered with a blanket instead of an old sack. It came to her after a few bewildered seconds. This was the attic room in the women's quarters, and she was on the top bunk – too close to the sloping ceiling, so that she would bang her head if she sat up in a hurry. She had already learnt to think before she moved.

Lying there, she listened. Who was it, groaning and muttering? Not Durba, who was sleeping soundly in the bunk below her: not Shebel in the upper bunk opposite. So it must be Maeneb.

Although Maeneb was not a deliberately cheerful nine-year-old, it had sometimes occurred to Yaret that the reticent woman, despite her avoidance of other people, might be lonely. So now she slithered down from her bed and seized her stick to hobble over to the bunk, one-footed, in the dark.

Her body told her that it was still two hours or so to dawn. A little moonlight illuminated the attic: the light from the occasional lamps dotted along the streets outside did not reach this high. She could not tell if Maeneb was awake or not.

"Maeneb?" she whispered. A grunt, a pause. Well, Maeneb was awake now.

"What?"

"Are you all right? You were muttering."

"Sorry." Another pause. "I think I must have been... hearing voices in my sleep."

"I thought you could shut them out."

"Usually I can," said Maeneb, sounding weary, "but there are so many here. And they never stop. They just leak through."

"You could ask Shebel for a sleeping draught."

"I'd rather not." After a moment Maeneb added, "I need to know what's going on. There have been a lot of... difficult voices here."

"You mean difficult to interpret?"

"I mean difficult to bear." Yet another pause. "There's a lot of misery in this city."

Yaret considered this, wondering how Maeneb would have fared in the devastated cellars of Obandiro. But there were fewer voices there. So few; so few. "There's a lot of misery in every city, I expect," she said.

Maeneb was silent.

"Try to sleep," suggested Yaret.

"I keep thinking I feel stonemen," said Maeneb's voice. She sounded desolate.

Alarm coursed through her. "Stonemen? Here, in Kelvha? Surely that's not possible."

"I know. They're probably not stonemen – almost certainly they're not – but all the same. There's just something there that keeps reminding me of them. It's the... the narrowness of mind. The focus on one thing, and everything beyond a blur. Hard to explain."

Yaret said, "Do you mean the effect of the drugs, the Athelid the stonemen took?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Probably there are people in the city taking drugs as well," she said, "that's all."

"Yes."

"So try to sleep."

“Yes.”

Yaret hobbled back to her bunk and contemplated how to scramble up to it without waking Durba. Bathroom first. By the time she returned she felt fully awake. Maeneb's words – though surely without foundation – had set her nerves and reason jangling.

Stonemen. She'd managed not to think about them for the last few days: there had been so much going on that it was relatively easy to shelve them in the recesses of her mind. The dreadful battles in the north against the stoneman army, Yaret had told herself, were over now, although she knew that they were not, and that Huldarion and the Vonn would in due course have to ride out in battle once again – next time, she understood, towards the south.

But that would be with Kelvha at their back. Their new allies. It should be easier. And the stoneman army had been thoroughly dispersed. So why would Maeneb feel any minds like stonemen's inside Kelvha?

Standing quite still in the dark beside her bunk, Yaret remembered the first stonemen she had ever seen: that sentry by the pass above the Gyr tarn. The sentry's back had been towards her – thank the stars – and at the time she had not understood about the circlet of stones he wore around his shaven head.

Later on she'd learnt the truth: that he wore the stones not on his head, but in it. Drilled into the skull in some incomprehensible ceremony, the thought of which still sickened her. The pain could be borne only with the aid of drugs; that Athelid whose composition was still not known, although Shebel had a sample hidden somewhere.

But Yaret had seen the effects of the Athelid's withdrawal. That had been later on: the lone stoneman, Brael, left behind in that burnt, deserted, eerie town far in the north. Abandoned in an agony of pain. Brael had told her he was ten years old, before she killed him as he asked. Now she stared into the night, remembering. Such a winter.

Then she shook her head. Maeneb was asleep again, she guessed; but for herself, there was no sleeping now. So she did not attempt to climb into her bunk but instead strapped on her wooden foot. Then she quietly gathered her pile of clothes and boots and carried them out into the corridor where she dressed. Two hours to dawn: she could use those two hours. She'd claim she'd gone out for an early walk.

Down in the kitchen Yaret drank water from the jug, grabbed a lump of bread, and put two spoons in her pocket before she crept out of the door. She contemplated visiting the stables: should she take a horse?

No. Its hooves would be too audible in the night. And she'd be too conspicuous. So walk. It would be no more than an hour on foot, she judged, to where she aimed for.

Which was the same place she had visited two days ago, when she rode there in company with Maeneb and Rothir and Theol, around the outside of the city. Yaret had suggested the route to Theol, in order to look for the outlet by the north gate: for that was the spot nearest the place where the darkburn was imprisoned on the other side of the city walls, in the northern quarter, within the empty bath-house.

As she walked through the pre-dawn shadows she found that the narrow streets to the West Gate were by no means empty. The women's lodgings were not in the best part of the city, if not the worst either. In the occasional dim lamplight she could see a mixture of late revellers straggling home to bed and the more purposeful early risers: workmen, tradesmen, a bread delivery, a cart-load of fresh poultry. In between them skulked or staggered a few who did not know what time it was, the permanently drunk or drugged or simply witless. A woman ran out to clutch at her coat and promise her a good time, young sir, only one small silver dreb for half an hour. A desperate woman. Yaret declined her roughly and walked on.

Passing a food stall which served breakfast to the early workers, she paused to buy from the glum seller a slice of cheese to go with her bread, and a lump of the gum that many of the workers here chewed. She knew it from her previous visits to outer Kelvha – it was some sort of tree sap, sweet for the first minute of chewing, and increasingly disgusting afterwards. It was supposed to wake you up but she suspected it contained no active ingredient beyond its acrid flavour. That certainly woke you up.

When she reached the West Gate there was no difficulty getting out. The gate was already open and a thin stream of men was on its way through: mostly farm labourers, she thought, both from the look of them and from their grumbling exchanges. Her own clothes were as nondescript and well-worn as any labourer's, so she just followed the others. The guards were more concerned with people coming in than leaving. As they moved purposefully over to check a pair of fruit-laden carts, Yaret slipped out unchallenged.

Then she walked north, eating her bread and cheese, keeping close to the massive wall while ahead of her the labourers gradually dispersed into the shadowy fields to her left until she was alone. As she walked the world slowly transformed, the great bowl of sky in its immense unhurried revolution changing to violet alongside her. She turned her head to look; and had the unsettling sensation that someone not far behind her had stopped too.

She halted. Surreptitiously checking that her knife was in her belt, she gazed up as if to study the stars, which were now dimming. The sky over the castle to her right acquired a luminous glow, preparing for its dawn colours. Nobody walked past her. Nobody looked suspicious. She saw a couple of men trudge like shadows through the meadows to where cows were waiting patiently.

As she at last walked on again, she listened. Nothing but the lowing of the distant cows. But the earthen track would not be difficult to tread on silently. She half expected some rush of a footpad running up behind her, and was wary until she reached the first of the stalls and workshops propped up against the northern wall. There she relaxed a little, because she was no longer solitary.

One or two lamps were lit, and men were moving around the workshops, setting up for the day. Always men. No women. But she knew the women had their own allotted tasks: the cooking, sewing, weaving, washing, looking after children. Nothing was easy if you weren't rich, whether man or woman. They would all be busy, apart from the grand ladies of the castle. Everybody had their job to do.

And here I am strolling along with hardly a care, she thought, little money in my pocket, true, but no job to do either. Except this one, which has been forbidden me by Rothir.

Back in Obandiro they'll be starting to wake up. Morning comes earlier over in the east. What would they be doing back home: would any more survivors have arrived to swell their numbers? Was Dil still caring for the donkeys? Was Anneke's baby sitting up yet? Had they cleared any more streets of ash, and finished rebuilding the school? Had the hob returned?

Now why had the hob sprung to her mind? The thought was as unexpected as the real thing. If the real thing was real. To her it was. She hadn't seen a hob or lin for two weeks now – maybe three – certainly not since they entered Inner Kelvha, and she hadn't thought about them either until now. Maybe it was a lin that she had glimpsed behind her earlier, not a footpad. That would explain why she'd seen nothing when she turned around. Look at a lin and it vanishes. Turns to a clump of grass, a weed, a rock. Nothing to see there.

Rothir would doubtless laugh at her. No, he'd frown. No, he'd look slightly exasperated, in that way he had. She wasn't sure if Rothir believed in lins. Yet lins were no stranger than the huntress, just less visible. She hoped the huntress had forgiven him the killing of the tiger...

No, no, don't think of her. Don't think her name: too dangerous. Think of the darkburn. Nearly there now, at the North Gate.

She put the lump of gum into her mouth. Sweet. Now not so sweet. Oh, dear stars, she thought, how can anyone chew this for pleasure?

All the same she kept it resolutely in her mouth, chewing and trying to soften it. By now she was walking past the forge which Rothir had entered. Nobody was there yet. Though as she glanced towards the silent forge she caught a movement in the corner of her vision.

She looked back again, more closely. Nothing. Turn and it's gone. That must have been a lin: or, more likely near all these ramshackle buildings, a hob. Hobs liked human habitations, for reasons unknown. Everything about them was unknown. But it was cheering to think that there were hobs in Inner Kelvha, so close to the city. She bowed slightly and tucked the gum against her cheek while she murmured the lin's grace, since it served for hobs and woodwones too.

Only a hundred yards further on was the outlet from the bath-house in the northern quarter. Last time she had stood here there had been a trickle of fetid water coming through the grid: this time it seemed to be dry. Not far away, despite the uncertain twilight, she definitely saw a lin. As soon as she looked, it turned into a boulder.

She said the lin's grace again. Presumably lins had no sense of smell, because the stink here by the iron grid was abominable: unmistakably darkburn – that stench of bitter smoke, corruption and decay.

And the aura. The desolation, grief, fear, dread, and anger. It told you to kill yourself. It told you that there was no hope. She had to stop and lean against the wall until she got used to it. Because you could get used to it: you could learn to bear it.

She took a few deep breaths. The wall was warm against her back and she wondered if that was the darkburn too, heating the stones up. How close was it to her? Only a few yards, maybe. She had not seen the bath-house on the other side but Tiburé said it went right up to the wall and probably within it.

Yaret had visited the eastern bath-house yesterday, and she could visualise the darkburn: a small, black, burning huddle in the corner of a long, deep, tiled, empty bath. She had, back at her lodgings, two stones retrieved from stonemen's corpses, and kept for the sake of their protective effect against the darkburns. Darkburns would not come close to the stones. But she didn't want to disturb this one, so she had left the stones behind.

After her deep breaths she still wanted to run away, or just curl up and die; but she had come here with a task in mind. She needed to tackle the locks on the iron grid before it got too light. So she looked left and right: there was a cart somewhere behind her, probably a farmer, nothing else in sight. Although the north gate was not much further round the wall, there was no traffic to it. Tiburé had told her it did not open until after dawn.

Yaret turned back to the iron grid. The pale glow in the sky was now strong enough for her to see the two big locks, one high, one low. The darkburn aura was still very bad. The darkburn must be down at this end of the baths. No wonder the Kelvhans set no guard out here – no man would stay for long.

They had guards on the city side, though, Tiburé said. That would be necessary to keep the public well away. Maybe the guards had stones, to drive the darkburn as far from them as possible. They would need to, in order to withstand the fear.

But they must have brought the darkburn in through the opening on this side. They could never have carried it in its iron cage right through the city. It would have caused a riot. So this entrance must be long and wide enough for the darkburn to have been taken all the way through.

Which meant it was long and wide enough for it to come all the way back out. Yaret glanced around to make sure nobody was watching. Another lamp was being lit in the buildings a hundred yards away, but there was no-one near her. She spat the gum out into her hand, with relief, and divided it in half. Although it was still fairly hard she could mould it now.

Taking the spoons out of her pocket, she wrapped a layer of gum around the handle of one of them. This she inserted into the keyhole of the lower lock – it fitted easily – and pressed the gum against where she thought the pins ought to be. When she retrieved it there was quite a clear impression, although whether a locksmith could make anything of it, she did not know. She repeated the process on the upper lock with the second spoon and the remaining gum. Then she wrapped up both spoons carefully in a cloth and replaced them in her pocket. The gum was already hardening as it dried.

It was probably a pointless exercise. Even if the impressions were of any use, would she dare to take them to a locksmith? Yaret imagined herself being instantly reported and dragged off to the castle guards. Even if she did somehow manage to get keys made, they most likely wouldn't work. And even if they worked...

One thing at a time. The impressions might have a use even if she didn't know yet what it was. She walked back towards the workshops. The tannery was opening up now, and a man was carrying in a bundle of hides. They would hardly notice the darkburn stench in there: tannery workers would surely get immune to any smells within a day.

And once she was a little further off, the darkburn smell was gone completely, as was its aura. When she looked behind her to the north she thought she saw the lin, in the same place as before. Strange.

Turning back she saw another one – this time in the entrance of a workshop. She stared at it, bemused. Now it was an anvil. But had it not just been a lin?

"Can I help you?" A man stepped out of the workshop and paused to hang a lantern over the lintel. She realised that this was the blacksmith whose forge Rothir had visited the other day.

"Have you always had an anvil there?" she said.

"It's the sign of the trade. Did you trip over it? It gets moved around," he said, and moved it again, to the side of the door. Within the forge she could see the red glow of the furnace. The warmth billowed out into the cool morning air. The man looked north, and so did she, at the silver-gold layer of cloud laid like a bolt of silk along the sky.

He expected her to be a customer. She felt in her pocket. There, underneath the spoons, was the pack of arrowheads Rothir had given her. A gift that had brought her a greater pleasure than perhaps it warranted.

"Do you sell arrowheads?" she asked. The blacksmith had not seen her or Maeneb on that earlier trip. Only Rothir and Theol had gone into the forge. As she spoke, she realised that the man had only one ear: it looked as if he had never had one on that side. No scar.

"I do. Would you like to see them?"

She went in and viewed the display glittering in the lamp-light and the furnace glow: armoury and weapons on one side, spades and hoes and chisels on the other. Below the well-made arrowheads pinned to the wall was a line of buckles on a leather strap. One of those might suit Rothir. She would have liked to give him something.

But she couldn't give Rothir a buckle. He would thank her gravely and look alarmed. When he had presented her with those arrowheads, he hadn't been himself. Or rather, he had been a different self, not his usual one. To give him a present would be equivalent to giving him a kiss.

That was something she had thought about last night: for the news of Huldarion's marriage had generated a slightly febrile atmosphere amongst the Vonn. She had even caught Theol in the midst of making advances to Tiburé. What would it be like to kiss Rothir – apart from bristly? She would have liked to know, but the idea of his drawing back stood always in the way.

No, kissing him was not a possibility. She wondered now how much of her attachment to Rothir had come about in the dark, hopeless cellar of Obandiro, a desperate searching for something she could love when so much had been lost. She did not know. Love came wrapped so many ways.

Nevertheless, if she could not kiss him, she would like to be kissed by him. Sadly, that was never going to happen either. She was not the one he wanted. Rothir's woman was waiting for him in Caervonn: a woman as soft and lovely as a rose. He'd spoken of a fantasy, not a real person, Yaret understood that: but a fantasy woman with two arms and two legs. That would do him, Rothir had said. Even though she knew that also was a throwaway remark, it did not come out of nowhere.

Rothir had saved her life. So, naturally, he felt protective towards her. But she told herself it was ridiculous to think that he might feel anything more for her – a foreign woman in drab men's clothing, with one missing foot, a crooked nose, practically no money, total possessions two donkeys – no, forget the donkeys, they were Dil's now, and Poda was really only hers on loan – total possessions a second-hand lutine that she hadn't yet managed to buy strings for, and a far-off, burnt-out, abandoned farm. And Helba: that scruffy, useful little horse, a bit of joke, just like its rider. So there it was.

Meanwhile the smith was still waiting patiently.

"I'll have a dozen arrowheads," she said. "How much are the buckles?"

"Six drebs."

Too much anyway. But they were fine things. "Do you do any other small ironwork like those?"

"Now and then," he said. "Did you have anything in mind?"

She felt the wrapped spoons in her pocket. "Could you make keys, for instance?"

"I could if I had moulds or a master key to work from."

"I see." Would her impressions be good enough? She contemplated showing him the spoons. No, too dangerous. He would start asking questions. But why go to all the trouble of taking the impressions if she did nothing with them?

Her pondering was broken by a sudden clamour outside. There was the rattle of heavy cart-wheels, shouts and then a cry – almost a scream.

"What's going on?" she said.

The blacksmith had put his head out of the door. Now he withdrew it.

"Army," he said sombrely. "It's the third time this week. I think they're moving prisoners; not a pleasant business, but it doesn't do to interfere. They've told everyone to keep out of the way."

Yaret went to the door to look. Rattling towards the north wall was a heavy cart – but not an iron one: it held no huddled darkburn. Two men sat in it, heads bowed. She rather thought that they were chained.

She grabbed a hoe from the wall of the smithy. "Can I just borrow this for a minute?"

"What for?"

She didn't answer. Slinging the hoe over her shoulder, she strode out of the forge and walked obliquely towards the cart, trudging head down like the labourers she'd seen plodding to their fields. She got quite close to it before looking up as if caught by surprise.



Two men, shackled. Stonemen. The tunics looked brown, not red, in this half-light, but it was obvious.

For they were stonemen without their stones. Instead, each had around his head a series of deep holes, black and dripping blood. Yaret was horrified. She herself had extracted stones from stoneman corpses, to use for the protection against darkburns – but how could anyone do that to them while they were alive?

They must be drugged, she thought. I hope they're drugged. Ethlon or something. Lots of it. But why were they being brought here in the darkness before dawn?

"Hey! Who are you? What do you want?" It was one of the soldiers who had been accompanying the cart. Now he rode up to her, hand on his sword hilt.

"Sorry, sir," she said, ducking away from him. "On my way to work. Didn't see you."

"Well, I saw *you*. You were over here just before, weren't you, sneaking around the wall? What were you doing there?"

"I was having a piss."

The blow knocked her right over. Luckily he hadn't bothered to take his sword out of the scabbard before swiping at her head with it.

"Don't show such disrespect, boy! I should have you up before the guards for your language to an officer, and for fouling a public place."

"I'm sorry, sir. I thought that grid in the wall was the drain from the latrines." She hung her head, and did not try to rise up from her knees.

The soldier snorted. "Get out of here," he said. At that she did scramble to her feet, as hastily as she could, and hurried away clutching her hoe, her head sore and burning where he had hit it. As she ran she heard a moan come from the cart, ascending to a half-scream before it was cut off by the smack of another blow.

When she looked back the soldier was staring after her and she felt a wave of panic. What if he decided to arrest her after all? What if he galloped after her and searched her? What if they found the spoons, the impressions on the gum, and guessed what she'd been doing? If they identified her? The anticipated shame was almost overwhelming. The blight on Huldarion...

She kept her walk to a tired shamble, but her heart was thudding. She dared not glance back again until she was past the tannery. By then, thank the stars, the soldier had turned away. He was watching the other soldiers drag the prisoners from the carts, almost carrying them towards the grid. They seemed only semi-conscious.

And now someone must have produced a key, because the sudden flare of a lantern showed the soldier fumbling with the lower lock. Desperately she hoped that she had left no trace of gum around the keyholes: or worse, within them. If anything looked amiss they would immediately come running after her...

She needed to get out of sight. To ditch those spoons. What an idiot she was. Find a rabbit-hole, she fiercely told herself, a ditch, a crevice, anywhere. Just lose them! But there was nowhere she could hide the spoons unnoticed.

When she passed the smithy the blacksmith was outside the door, frowning at her. "So what was all that about?"

She handed him the hoe. "I was just being nosy, and I got walloped for it."

"I'm not surprised," he said, not unsympathetically. "You shouldn't go near that lot. Do you want those arrowheads?"

"Oh... Yes, I will, please."

The blacksmith dived into his shop. She dared not follow him in case she should be trapped in there. Instead she sauntered on, around the corner of the forge.

Here she was unseen. When she looked round in the dim light she spied a gap in the crumbling brick-work of the building, almost down at ground level. She took the cloth-wrapped spoons out of her pocket and shoved them into the hole, still in their wrappings. They were pretty much invisible; there was no more than a ragged end poking out. You would have to look hard to even notice it.

In any case there was no time to find a better place. She hurried back to the forge's entrance just as the smith came out. From the edge of her vision she saw the soldiers still busy round the grid in the wall. After paying for the arrowheads – more than she expected – she thanked the blacksmith and walked off casually, away from the cart. She waited for the sound of galloping to follow her but none did.

Even so it took several minutes for her heart to stop thumping so persistently. The light of the rising sun at last began to streak across the land, like gold-hot iron being forged upon the anvil of the misty fields. That insistent fire, once lit, then grew and grew to north and south.

Although the track she tramped along was still deep in the chilly shadow of the city wall, and would remain so for some hours to come, Yaret felt too visible. She sped up, and was limping by the time she reached the West Gate.

"Your business?"

The guards barred her way. It had been easy to get out; but now that she was on her own, she realised it would be harder to get in. She knew how down-at-heel she looked.

"I'm a groom serving a lady of the Vonn," she said. "A lady name of Tiburé. She's staying with Melegan, the Master of the Keys. She bid me find a blacksmith and I was told there was one up near the north gate, so I've just been there." She felt that she was gabbling and made herself stop.

"All right," the guard said, not that interested after all, and waved her through. The sight of the newly bustling street was, for the first time since her arrival in the city, a huge relief: the crowd and hubbub made her inconspicuous. She felt almost limp with the release of strain, with the awareness that no-one here was paying her the slightest attention.

I am nobody in Kelvha, thought Yaret; I am all but invisible. I need to stay invisible. Look at me and I turn into a stone. Nothing to see. Just like a lin.

## Chapter 16

"Two thousand troops?" said Nerogun, with faint disdain.

"Two thousand Riders of the Vonn: not ordinary troops," replied Huldarion coolly.

"Certainly not," Rhadlun concurred. "I have seen them fight."

Huldarion appreciated that comment. Although he did not care much for the Kelvhan captain on a personal level, considering him both over-lofty and somewhat over-confident, none the less he recognised Rhadlun as an able leader. Moreover, Rhadlun had the ear of the grey-haired Commander Jeveran – who ranked still higher in the army if not in the aristocracy of Kelvha, and who now sat at the table in the Chart Room with them.

Jeveran was a man of considerable acumen, Huldarion judged; and all the more to be respected because of his low rank. He was a commoner, unlike the Arch-Lord Marshal Shargun, the nominal head of the army who had led the Kelvhan troops up north. But Shargun, although he snapped out plenty of orders, had done little useful commanding. That had been left to Rhadlun and the other captains, who had shown a better grasp of strategy. Shargun was from one of the great families of Kelvha and had probably inherited his post.

Whereas Jeveran certainly had not, but had won his place through merit. *Not high born but seen as capable enough*: that had been Tiburé's summary. More than capable, thought Huldarion.

He would have liked to know Meya's opinion of him. She too was present, sitting a little apart from the large table; mainly as an ornament, but also as an unobtrusive director of the servants who topped up the ornate wine glasses and proffered delicate pastry tidbits that fragmented as soon as they were touched. Huldarion was very aware of her movements. He was very aware of everything about her. Her presence gave him a frisson of remembrance.

Her movements were few, however: she was the only woman in the room and she kept her mouth closed throughout the meeting. So did Thoronal and Solon, his pair of senior Riders, who were there for weight of numbers, not to talk. So too did the old Vizier, who looked as if he were nodding off. His sleepiness saddened Huldarion.

In truth, of the seven Kelvhan men around the table, Jeveran and Rhadlun were the only two whom he would wish to have fighting alongside him. But he needed the approval and consent of all the High Lords. Nerogun and Shargun were currently frowning over troop numbers: while the High Lord Brolgun, Keeper of the Swords, was more interested in the pastries. And young Prince Faldron was drinking too much wine. As Huldarion watched he drained his glass and motioned to the servant behind him to refill it.

"I too have seen the Riders fight," announced the Prince, watching the wine rise in his glass. "They fought very well, in my opinion."

Huldarion noted wryly how everybody ducked their head to listen deferentially even when Faldron was uttering such an inanity. For when had the boy ever fought in earnest? In the only battle he'd participated in, Faldron had been protected by his own men – and so inadequately that Huldarion had had to step in and rescue him.

He made allowances. Faldron was only twenty. But here at home in Kelvha he was not the eager, interested young man he'd been on the battlefield up north. The Prince seemed listless; castle life must bore him. Hence the wine. Here he was a sluggish, incurious youth, but not a rebellious one; for he agreed with everything Nerogun had to say.

Which was a lot. Huldarion composed himself to listen and to nod. Nerogun was laying out numbers of cavalry and infantry that might be allocated to his aid, although still under Kelvhan command. Huldarion did not argue with the quantity – time enough for that once the principle was settled – but he did take advantage of a gap to say,

“Whom would you ideally like to see designated as their General? Arch-Lord Shargun, I hope it might be yourself, although such a matter as Caervonn can be of little moment to you, and other demands on your attention may take precedence. In that case I would hope you might see fit to nominate Commander Jeveran in your stead.”

He was treading a fine line here. While he did not want Shargun, he did want Jeveran, but had a feeling that for reasons he did not understand, Nerogun did not. Possibly it was because of the commander’s relatively low birth. Rank complicated everything in Kelvha Castle.

Shargun shrugged as if undecided. “To march victorious into Caervonn, would, of course, be a glorious event.”

“But the march to get there may be arduous, and the fighting wearisome,” he pointed out.

“I expect Jeveran would be more interested in the fighting than in the fortunes of Caervonn,” said Shargun with a faint sneer.

“I take an interest,” said Jeveran, in measured tones, “not personal of course, but for the sake of Caervonn’s long heritage and history, which indeed are far more ancient than our own.” At that Nerogun drew a faint but sharp inward breath.

Huldarion thought that he was not the only one treading a fine line. But presumably it was a line that Jeveran had been treading for most of his career; and that career had been a lengthy one. He had the deeply lined weather-beaten face and the no-nonsense, active manner of a busy farmer. Nerogun would see no merit in the comparison, but Huldarion did.

“Moreover,” Jeveran went on, “it is paramount that the stonemen should be so finally defeated that they can pose no further threat to Kelvha. I am prepared to lead the troops on to the battlefield, if your Highness and the Arch-Lords so command.” He bowed his head to Prince Faldron, who looked at Nerogun, waiting for his guidance. No, definitely nothing like the independent Faldron of the battlefield.

Nerogun played with his pen, frowning at the papers laid before him. “Twenty thousand troops is a great many,” he said. “I would have thought the matter could be settled easily with less.”

“Possibly,” said Huldarion, “but we do not know the numbers of stonemen we may meet. I plan to order scouts to be sent out as soon this meeting is over.”

“We will co-ordinate,” said Jeveran. “I like to send my own scouts.”

“Naturally,” said Huldarion.

“If the Arch-Lord is pleased to offer me command, I would request as deputies Lord Rhadlun here, and General Istar of West Vale.”

Huldarion was pleased by this suggestion, although he took care not to show it, because Nerogun was still frowning.

“I would be honoured if they were to accept,” he said without emotion.

“You don’t even know where to send your scouts,” said Nerogun, to nobody in particular.

“I have some ideas. May I, your Highness?” When the Prince nodded, Huldarion took up and unrolled the documents that he had brought with him.

“From your Scriptorium,” he said. “By the grace of the High Lord Keeper of the Archives and his assistant.”

“That little stammering mouse,” said Nerogun with disdain.

“More of a mole, I think,” said Jeveran, “one that emerges from its home blinking in the sunlight. A clever little man.”

“Indeed,” said Huldarion as if uninterested. After the information that Tamu had passed on about the spyholes scattered round the castle – one of them in the very Chart Room in which they now sat – he did not wish to draw any unnecessary attention to the man. “He transcribed these chronicles from the time of your august King Garean, some years ago.”

“Three centuries ago,” said Shargun dismissively.

“Quite so. There are within them references to what may have been an early form of darkburn: of great interest, but not directly relevant to this meeting. What is more relevant is a reference to the early stonemen – or rather, to the tribe that later on became the stonemen, and who built their temple at the Place of Terns far south-east of here.”

Nerogun sighed. It was almost a yawn.

“And?”

“I have heard a stoneman speak about the Place of Terns. It was where he had grown up, beside the sea. I did not think of it as a formal place name until I saw this chronicle, and read about a battle your King Garean fought there.”

“Map,” said Shargun to the servant standing behind him, who merely looked bewildered. Jeveran got up from his chair and went to search the wide shelves set along one wall and laden with layered maps, before plucking a large and somewhat tattered parchment from one of them. He spread it out upon the table.

“This is from the same period,” he said. Although attractively adorned, with details picked out in gold, as maps went it was rudimentary. However, Caervonn was clearly marked by a little carefully drawn picture of a fort, surprisingly accurate, which made Huldarion feel momentarily homesick. To the north of it the Darkburn Forest was an amorphous cloud with a threadlike river winding through it seemingly at random. But on the coast the bays and headlands were easily identifiable.

And the Place of Terns was named, in antique Kelvhan, some ninety miles or so distant from Caervonn. Huldarion pointed to it.

“There. Beyond this area called the Red Roads.”

“Hah! There’s nothing there,” said Rhadlun.

“At least,” said Jeveran more ruminatively, “it has never been explored. The Red Roads were, in my youth, rumoured to be rivers of blood. I went there once; the land is criss-crossed with waterways, although of course no blood flows in them. But they are difficult to cross and there is nothing visible beyond to make it worth the effort – only more wetlands, and then at last the sea.”

“Nevertheless,” said Huldarion, “that is where the stonemen of the time set up a monastery and temple. I believe it may still be one of their centres. Certainly it was named as their most important base back in King Garean’s day.”

“A temple to what?” asked Rhadlun dismissively. “I can’t imagine stonemen worshipping anything.”

Huldarion thought of a man with a golden face. But he said nothing of that. “Apparently they worshipped stones,” he said, “but not as they do now. Back then, they don’t seem to have adopted the practice of drilling stones into their skulls, although they may have worn them round the brow, set into headbands. The chronicles refer to them worshipping the spirits of the stones.”

“Standing stones, perhaps,” said Thoronal, speaking for the first time.

“No doubt those type of old stone circles,” Nerogun said with a smile, “where primitive people dance round naked and have their orgies.”

Huldarion was surprised but did not show it. "Possibly. Who knows?" He let his glance alight briefly on Meya. He could tell that she was not amused at Nerogun's comment. Perhaps Nerogun had said it as an indirect reference to the other night... The following morning, Meya had evidently had to tell the Post-Regent of the successful consummation. And the Post-Regent had come along to ask Huldarion to confirm it; to which Huldarion had merely said, "I am happy to do so."

It had been politic for him to say it with some feeling. But the feeling had been real, not feigned. He had been very glad to have won such a response from Meya. She had a voluptuous body and his delight in it had caught him unawares. Now, sitting at the table opposite her, he thought about her body, its soft weight, the sense of luxury, of plenty. He would like to see as well as hold her. Though to hold her had been a privilege...

Nerogun coughed, and he became aware that he had been gazing at the object of his thoughts. Nerogun thought he was a lascivious fool.

Well, let him think it. I am no fool, mused Huldarion, but lascivious, definitely, at the moment. He dragged his eyes away as if reluctantly.

"Whatever the Place of Terns was for, I believe it should be visited, if possible," he said. "There may be a path across the waterways. From there, if nothing else, we may well find roads leading to other Stoneman centres. But I expect to find more than merely roads."

"What we need are one or two prisoners to give us information," said the old Vizier. Not quite asleep, then, after all.

He noticed Rhadlun throw a quick glance at Nerogun.

"You had two, I believe," said Nerogun to Huldarion.

"Yes. We had a pair of captive stonemen, for a short while," he replied. "They proved almost useless as far as information went – apart from that one reference to the Place of Terns." They had told him more than that: but the rest was not relevant just now, and he had no intention of mentioning the stonemen's supposed youthfulness. One had been twelve, one fifteen – if they could be believed. But any revelation about their age would only muddy waters which Huldarion needed to be clear until his ship had sailed; or rather, until his troops, and Kelvha's, had marched out. "They could not be kept alive for long," he added.

"Ah, of course: the drugs. This athelid I've heard about. Did you discover what it was?" asked Nerogun, his head tilted in curiosity.

"A white paste: that was all that the prisoners could tell me. What its constituents were, I don't know. Ethlon, probably, but the rest is still uncertain." A sample of that paste, which three female Riders had found at the Outland Forts, was still in Shebel's keeping, well concealed. Perhaps Meya would know of a discreet herb-master who could test it. He would suggest that to Shebel.

"Very well." Nerogun did not pursue the subject. He began to put his papers together. "Twenty thousand men, then, if your scouts indicate that number will be needed. I hope it may be less. But time will tell. And Jeveran to be their commander on the field. Myself and Shargun will, of course, take overall command."

"Of course," said Huldarion.

"And as for the young prince here, no doubt he'll want to join in, won't you, eh?" Nerogun looked at Faldron with a smile and an eyebrow raised in friendly enquiry.

Again Huldarion was surprised. This campaign could well be even tougher than the first had been, up north. Why pitch the boy into such an unpredictable battle?

"Oh, yes," said Faldron. "Definitely."

So maybe Nerogun was merely anticipating an inevitable demand. Yet the Prince had shown no sign of pressing any claim to fight. As Faldron beckoned to the servant for more wine Meya made a small movement as if she would have prevented him.

"Enough for now, I think," said Nerogun almost mildly.

"Yes, quite enough," said Faldron. The servant withdrew the flagon but did not put it down. Instead he kept it in his hands. Huldarion realised that the Prince drank from a different flagon to the rest; he reproved himself for not noticing this before.

Now was not the moment to enquire about it. As Faldron stood up to leave, Huldarion stood too and bowed to him, as did the others, Nerogun last of all, with leisurely slowness.

Ah, thought Huldarion, he's making the most of his year as Post-Regent. Next year when Faldron becomes High King, Nerogun will be left with nothing but the title. Will he really give up power so easily after so many years? But Nerogun had probably accumulated riches enough for a very comfortable retirement, he reflected, and would doubtless be retained as an advisor.

The Arch-Lords and the young Prince left, the old Vizier trailing after them. There remained only himself with his two silent Riders: the two Kelvhan commanders, and Meya.

"Right. Scouts," said Jeveran, rubbing his hands together. "Let us look over the maps now. More recent ones. Are you agreeable, Rhadlun?"

They pored over the maps discussing the most profitable places to reconnoitre. Jeveran was as fully engaged as Huldarion had hoped. He knew the spy-hole in the chart room was just over Rhadlun's shoulder; and guessed that while it would not have been manned before, while Nerogun was present, it probably would be now. No matter. These were no secrets that they were discussing. Nerogun was welcome to them.

He was also very aware of Meya listening in. Wanting to convey his satisfaction, he looked up at her, smiling, to say,

"Your father would have enjoyed this, I expect."

"He would," she answered coolly. "My late husband also."

Well. Not much warmth there. None the less he found himself hoping that her next visit to his bedroom would not be too far off; and had to pull his attention back to the charts.

At last the plans for numbers and destinations of scouting parties were agreed. They all rose and with the minimum of courtesies left the chart room to go in various directions. Meya walked away without a word. Perhaps she did not wish to appear too enthusiastic about her coming marriage; all the same, he had expected some acknowledgement.

Never mind that now, Huldarion told himself. He had begun to cross the courtyard with Thoronal and Solon when Tiburé came walking swiftly towards them. She curtseyed low to Huldarion – that was quite a feat, he thought, to get Tiburé to curtsey – and then greeted Solon, her husband, in a much more affectionate manner than usual.

"What do you want?" said Solon.

"To talk to Huldarion. But the only reason they would let me into the castle was because I said I needed to talk to you, dear husband."

"Well, here we are. Spit it out," said Solon.

Then Huldarion remembered. "The darkburn. You said you'd found it?"

"Yes; that and the Temple of Borgun," answered Tiburé. "There's something that you need to know. But I haven't been able to reach you when you're free until today. You've been busy."

"I have indeed." He glanced around the courtyard. Any listeners hidden in the nearby buildings would need very long ears indeed to make out any words spoken here.

"Tell us your news, now, quietly," he said.

She spoke first about the discovery of the darkburn hidden in the bath-house, and then about Yaret's exploration of the temple of Borgun. In a grim, low voice, she related what Borgun's priest had said – that a man looking exactly like Huldarion had visited the temple.

He was alarmed. "We are watched. Laugh," he said. So they all did, as if he had just made a joke. "What did Yaret think? Did she believe the priest?"

"Does it matter what she thought?" asked Thoronal.

"Yaret has good judgement," said Huldarion.

"She's a village archer. How would she know anything about what goes on in a place like Kelvha?" objected Thoronal. Huldarion had to raise his hand for silence to allow Tiburé to continue.

She said, "Yaret didn't know whether to believe the priest or not. She said he did not seem like a man that would be easily deluded – unless you regard all priests as such. He was convinced that you had visited the temple the first evening we arrived. He had seen you previously, when the Vonn entered the city, and recognised you."

"Did Yaret tell him that it was impossible?"

"No. She thought the priest might be misled by his own yearnings. Then the priest told her that you bore the marks of Borgun, and that he hoped that you might rise up in Borgun's name and fight for the people. Or words to that effect."

"Dear stars." Huldarion was appalled.

"Quite."

"We have been huddled here too long. Laugh, and then disperse a little," he commanded. They all dutifully laughed again before Thoronal and Solon wandered apart from him. Only Tiburé remained at his side.

"One last thing," she murmured. "Just in case, Yaret gave the priest a code word. She told him, if you see this man again, and he claims to be Huldarion, ask him for the Vonn's secret word and then you will know if he speaks the truth."

"We have no such word."

"Of course not. She made it up."

"What word did she give him?"

"The sea."

Huldarion caught his breath. The sea. He saw and heard it in his memory: the long dim coastline, a few miles from Caervonn. The sighing grey. Once so beloved. Still so beloved.

And somewhere far along that coast, the Place of Terns. He heard their cries against the ragged waves, that long chirring fall.

"A good word," he said. An idea was forming swiftly in his mind. He started to stride back across the courtyard, retracing his steps. "Tiburé, what I will say to you in a moment in this room is not for you to act on, but is for other ears that may be listening – spying on us. So do not tell the priest of what I say. But first, I need an excuse to lead you in..."

He beckoned the other two over and they all re-entered the Chart Room together. He looked around: not for the spy-hole, because he did not want to give away his knowledge, but for the maps.

"Now, where is it? I believe Jeveran put it back upon this shelf. Ah yes. Look here, Tiburé, this is what I wanted to show you. See how beautifully the map-makers drew our city of Caervonn, in miniature, three centuries ago." He showed her the antique map and Tiburé expressed suitable amazement.



"Now, that other matter," said Huldarion distinctly, "while we are private here. Tiburé, I do not approve of any of us entering the temple of Borgun. It is a place of superstition, not for us to visit or give credence to. But since your servant did enter – and learnt from the priest that someone claiming to be me had been there – I have decided that I need to take precautions against any such imposture."

"Indeed, sir," said Tiburé gravely.

"Therefore some messenger must go back to the temple and say this to the priest: that if any man enters claiming to be me, the priest must ask him for a code word." He paused. "The word is *Ruby*. Will you see to that?"

"I will, sir." She curtsied.

"Good," said Huldarion. "And now it must be nearly time for dinner. Come." He found himself disliking the peremptory way in which he spoke.

What is happening to me, he thought, that I find myself adopting Kelvhan manners? It may be necessary in some circumstances. But it must not become a habit.

So once they were half way across the courtyard for a second time, he spoke more courteously to Tiburé.

"One last thing, if you don't mind. If the priest is right about the imposture, there is a man who might know about such things. Or, rather, there is a wizard. I haven't seen him since we arrived here, and I don't know where he's lurking in this city; but I would be grateful if you can find Leor."

## Chapter 17

He staggered over to the basin and threw water at his face. Most of it just dribbled down his beard. Leor knew it would do nothing to wash away last night's grime, but he didn't have the energy or the co-ordination to try any harder.

It occurred to him, not for the first time, that maybe he was playing his part a little too well. When he had settled into the cramped room in this tavern in a humdrum part of Kelvha City, he had not identified himself as a wizard – that would have made the rates sky-rocket – but as an unsuccessful horse-trader. It had only needed the use of a little melding spell. Although he had forsworn all magic, there was no harm in this morsel of it: a tiny charm to turn himself into a good-natured but totally unmemorable drunk.

It was slightly alarming to discover how easy it was. How well it worked. The landlord barely remembered who he was from day to day.

Indeed, I'm not sure that I recall myself: is this really me? Leor wondered, staring into the inadequate mirror. His eyes were still red-rimmed from last night's smoke. He threw some more water at them before running his fingers through his hair in lieu of a comb. Then he clattered downstairs into the gloomy little parlour. At this time in the morning it was almost empty: but not quite.

Veron was waiting for him, sitting cross-legged in a chair in the corner. He wore neither his cloak with the wolfskin hood nor his Vonnish green, either of which would have marked him out as a stranger to the city; but rather an outfit of drab, rusty black which matched Leor's own. Veron too would have looked entirely unmemorable were it not for the array of weaponry dangling from his belt and the piercing watchfulness of his gaze. To Leor's eyes, he still had the unmistakable air of a hunter.

"Well? How did it go last night?" inquired Veron.

Leor went over to the dresser, looked at the plates of cold congealing meat and drying bread, and groaned. He picked up a pitcher of water and sat down with it opposite Veron.

"I drank too much," he said. His voice was hoarse.

"Your choice," said Veron. "But what did they say?"

Leor threw his mind back to that smoky tavern – much bigger than this one, and even less salubrious – in the northern quarter. He'd managed to latch on to a group of workmen celebrating the last day of their construction job. Repairs to the bridge near the bath-house: they expressed their loud relief in being finished with the place and its dreadful stink.

Leor had said to them with casual geniality, "It still stinks, though. So did your repairs not work?" His melding spell was just as effective there as elsewhere: it made him fit into his surroundings, reflecting the clothes and speech of those around him so that nobody bothered to question who he was. If anyone had asked them, they would just have answered, *Oh, that's what's-his-name. You see him around.*

"It's the drains. Clogged up by all those foreign riff-raff hanging round the northern quarter," answered one of his companions.

"Nah, it's that temple on Old Tanneries Street," grumbled another. "Attracts all sorts. Unsavoury. They ought to close it down."

"It's not just drains," said a third in a mysterious tone. "I told you. They've got a demon in there, underneath the wall."

"You and your demon," said the first, draining his tankard.

Leor gestured for another jug of beer to be brought over and poured out. "What sort of demon?" he asked.

"It's small and black. It burns through doors. They give it human sacrifices."

"Who do? That temple?" asked the second man.

"Nah. Not them. Like I said, it's buried underneath the wall, not far from the north gate. The night watchman on the gate said he's heard the screams."

"You'd scream too with that stink in your nose all night. And that watchman has his head in a brandy bottle half the time."

The talk had rambled on around the subject. After Leor related this to Veron, he added, "They didn't actually know anything definite. It was all rumour and suspicion."

"But you spoke to the watchman?" said Veron.

"Yes. Once I left the inn," continued Leor, "I went to the gate and pretended I was a minor lord – second rank – who'd got lost and was afraid of footpads. I shared the watchman's brandy and bought him some more as an inducement to guide me part of the way home. Expensive stuff it was too, considering its harshness on the tongue. To say nothing of the head."

"And?"

Leor frowned. "I, um, persuaded the watchman to take a route close to the bath-house."

"Persuaded how?"

Leor shrugged. "I just suggested it." It had required no more than a tweak of wizardry. "I asked him what was going on in there, apart from the stink, and pretended I'd heard noises. And then I got the full yarn: the clanging of gates that vibrated through the wall even though the main north gate was shut and locked for the night: the sound of carriages on the outer side: visitors arriving at the inside, on horseback, from the city, cloaked and hooded..."

"I know about those," Veron said. "I don't need to know what's happening. I need to know what people think is happening."

"Mostly a demon," said Leor. He took another draught of water. "The watchman thinks it's some evil spirit conjured up by the Temple of Borgun, intentionally or not, and now it has to be kept safe by the Kelvhan army. Because it can't be killed. But they don't want people to know it's there, in case they panic."

"But people do know it's there. They know there's something there."

"Something with no face, no name," said Leor. "Nobody said the word darkburn. If they've heard of darkburns they don't know what they actually are."

"So it's a spirit. Demon. What about the screams?"

"That's the demon calling for his lover, according to the watchman," said Leor wryly.

"Not human sacrifices?"

"No. My builder friend thought that one up all on his own."

"And you suggested?"

"To the watchman: I say I've heard it's some creature that they're breeding for the combats. Part bear, part whatever. To the builders: I've heard a rumour that the army are tunnelling below the wall to make a secret passage, for defensive purposes, and have hit an ancient cess-pit. No demon, the story's just a conspiracy to keep ordinary people out. All top security. I say I shouldn't have mentioned it but my second cousin knows the nephew of the Keeper of the Swords, and I'm sure they won't pass it on to anybody else."

"I like that one," said Veron.

"So do I. Happy?"

"Happy enough." Veron stood up, speared a piece of meat off a plate with one of his knives, and began to eat it. "And what about today?"

"I was rather hoping to go back to bed," said Leor.

"Go to the markets instead."

"Which one?"

"All of them. You can be as many different people as you like. Can't you?"

Leor rubbed his chin, not wanting to admit it. "Why?"

"Another tale for you to spread," Veron replied. "This one is about the city walls. There's an infection in the stone. Makes it go bad. First it stinks and then it crumbles."

"Infected walls? Who's going to believe that?"

"Not many," said Veron. "But every little helps."

"Every little what?"

Veron grinned at him. "Every little bit of added confusion." Putting another slice of meat between two chunks of bread, he made for the door. He paused with his hand on the doorknob. "Have you been to the temple?"

"The temple of Borgun? I've had it pointed out to me."

"Been inside it?"

"No," said Leor. "Should I?"

"Up to you. But someone has been, who looked like Huldarion but wasn't."

"Looked like..." Leor was shocked. "Well, that certainly wasn't me."

"Good," said Veron. Until then he had continued playing with his knife: now he thrust it back into his belt. "Might be nothing but the priest's imagination. Might be something." He nodded and went out.

Something? Leor felt as shaken as if an unknown someone had been impersonating *him*, not Huldarion. Had that knife been a warning? He felt a flash of anger. If Veron thought he could threaten him or hurt him, he was wrong.

But Veron did not threaten. Leor had never heard a threat come from the hunter's lips.

He gives his prey no warning, Leor thought. They make a slip, and then they're dead. But I am warned, regardless. Who could walk the streets of Kelvha City pretending to be Huldarion, apart from myself?

Only my other half. The only other wizard in this world: Adon. Once so close to me, his path now so diverged from mine that I no longer know him. I do not know where he is. I cannot detect his presence. Not long ago, I idly thought he might be hiding in the Kelvhan army when we marched into the city. What if it was no idle thought? What if he is here?

Leor's heart was thumping alarmingly despite its unbreakability. He told himself that Maeneb would undoubtedly detect Adon; she would feel Adon's mind, if he were anywhere close, and she would tell Leor.

Undoubtedly? Make that probably. No. Possibly. If Adon were to shield himself, Maeneb would not feel him...

Almost my brother, he thought, once more than brother: my twin, my closest friend, my mirror image. But the mirror now is broken.

If he is here, how will I know him?

And if I find him, what should I do?

## Chapter 18

They had only been in the Music Hall for a quarter-hour, and already Maeneb was wondering how long she would be obliged to stay.

There was a little music going on, at the back, a low thrumming of lutines and a faint squawk of flutes: not quite loud enough to be enjoyed, but just loud enough to be annoying. The female Riders were not here primarily for the music. They were here to be presented to the ladies of the castle. To make friends with them. To chatter and admire and laugh and... urgh. Maeneb had already had enough of it.

The admiration was the only part that she could do, and she felt that she was getting even that wrong. When Lady Meya had presented her to the line of ladies – the supposed informality hiding a rigid hierarchy of Arch-ladies, elder ladies, lesser ladies, and so on down the pile – Maeneb had felt her face stiffening as she attempted to compose some sort of suitable compliment to each.

And she had seen their faces stiffening in return as they looked her up and down, not quite unobtrusively enough. When she caught the tenor of their thoughts she could fill in the words with ease. *Pretty enough woman. Should be married, at her age. But odder even than the average Rider of the Vonn. Strange way of talking. Awkward manners. Dreadful clothes. Next, please.*

So after all these painful introductions she stood aside and pretended to study the rich hangings that were draped on every wall, high above the chattering heads: huge, dense embroideries of ladies riding demurely side-saddle, or sewing in a clipped knot-garden, or dancing in a field of orange flowers, more inaudible musicians round them, unlikely birds and rabbits looking on. Such silly things. Yet years of work in each of them. So many ruined eyes.

The Kelvhan ladies in the Music Hall were, for the most part, just as heavily embroidered as the walls; although Lady Meya's rich brown dress was unadorned, and a few young ones, like the Lady Janeya, wore looser, flowing silks. Still exquisite, though. By contrast, most of the Riders' clothes were shabby and unbecoming – or so at least the Kelvhan ladies thought. You did not even need to be a mind-reader to know that. The Lady Shildha, Tiburé's hostess, resplendent in red silk, had actually mouthed *Dear me*.

It was the sight of women wearing breeches that dismayed them more than anything. Only a dozen of the twenty or so female Riders present wore dresses. Maeneb had no idea where they had got them from – she had seen the prices in the markets – unless they had been borrowed from Alburé or Tiburé. Nobody had offered *her* a dress. Delgeb strode around in a long green gown that gave her the appearance of a muscular tree. Shebel looked quite fetching in a russet skirt. Naileb was in pink. Maeneb hated pink.

She looked around for Durba, her companion in awkwardness. Durba had not made any more attempts lately to get close to her – either physically or emotionally – which was a relief. She must have realised Maeneb wanted no such approaches, whether made in friendship or something more.

Admittedly Durba would have difficulty making any such proposals at the moment, being voiceless. Maeneb saw her waiting in the presentation line, looking comfortable enough in breeches; and her thoughts were surprisingly comfortable too, even though she had stammered helplessly through her first introduction with an Arch-lady before resorted to nodding and smiling.

Alburé was still subdued – that undercurrent of sadness ever-present in her thoughts – but, being familiar with Kelvhan high society, was none the less at ease. So was Delgeb, more surprisingly; she seemed as much in her element in this long over-decorated hall as she would be galloping around in pursuit of stonemen. Perhaps both occasions were, to her, just different types of battlefield.

Of course the Kelvhan ladies were all perfectly graceful and composed... Except that dreadfully thin one standing a few yards away – Sina, was it? She looked as nervous as a starving deer, and emanated panic. Maeneb felt a certain sympathy; but not enough to make her go up to the girl and start to talk. In any case, just then Durba walked over to Sina and gave her a nod and a friendly smile. Stars knew what *that* conversation would be like. A communion of stammers.

Maeneb knew she was expected to talk to people: that was the whole point of being here. She just didn't know how to do it. Amongst the Riders she could say what she needed to – small talk was not required. Making polite conversation in this vast group of supercilious strangers was totally beyond her. The sheer number of so many people was oppressive and the necessity of seeming at her ease with them was doubly so. But she couldn't study the wall hangings all evening.

In desperation, she walked down the hall towards the musicians. A group of oldish men, they bent diligently over their instruments and did not look up. The only other males in the room stood ranged in a line against the wall behind the players, a wooden regiment of footmen with their hands behind their backs, all staring straight ahead.

She wandered towards Yaret who was listening to the music and talking to a young Kelvhan lady. That was Janeya, looking beautiful in yellow silk; she was the one Huldarion ought to have chosen, according to some. Although according to Sashel he ought to have chosen the Princess Idria. The Princess was not here but was supposed to make some brief appearance later on.

Maeneb went up to Yaret and Janeya. She knew she had to make the effort to speak, to look as if she was not a total outcast. But it was difficult. Her tongue seemed over-thick in her mouth.

"It is very interesting music," she said into a gap, although it wasn't. Maeneb had once been told she had a lovely singing voice. But what was the use of that? She disliked the sound of her own singing; and most music was tedious to her, or incomprehensible.

"It is certainly interesting to hear the lutines played in concert," said Yaret in her careful Kelvhan. She was trying to dampen down her rustic accent but without complete success. "I have recently acquired a lutine, but it has no strings. And when I shall have bought some, I will probably string it wrong for Kelvhan ears. You use a different tuning here to back at home." Maeneb wondered how she could speak so readily of *home*, as if it had not been burnt to the ground. "Do you play, Lady Janeya?"

"A little. You?"

"No," said Maeneb.

"I love the lutine, but I play it badly," said Janeya with rueful good-humour, "don't I, Proli?"

The foremost lutenist – presumably Proli – glanced up at her with a half-smile.

"Not so bad, my lady," he said. "You need to practise more regular, that's all."

"Ah," said Janeya. "That's the problem. If only I could be as faithful to the lutine as I can to my other loves."

Yaret looked at her enquiringly. "What other interests do you enjoy?"

"I enjoy riding," said Janeya, "in the right place and with the right company, but both can be hard to come by here. You have your own horses?"

"Yes," said Maeneb.

"I have two," said Yaret. "I have the loan of a very fine high-bred Vonnish horse called Poda, all proud arched neck and stamping feet, but my own horse is an intrepid, untidy little mare with no high breeding whatsoever." Maeneb was envious of her fluency; not in the Kelvhan language – which was not as good as Maeneb's own, for Yaret still struggled with the tenses – but in finding things to say that did not sound ridiculous.

"I like the sound of that little horse of yours. High breeding is over-rated," said Janeya. "Is that not so, Proli?"

"That's not for me to judge, my lady," said Proli, keeping his gaze down this time.

"And it is an over-easy judgement for you to make, my Lady Janeya," said someone else behind them. It was the Lady Meya, smiling, but also with a firm edge to her voice. "Breeding matters, whether we wish it to or not. I do not think that you would care to find yourself standing amongst the servants instead of merely talking to them."

"But servants may be very fine people, with noble hearts," said Janeya, glancing across the musicians' heads to the immobile row of footman. "May they not?"

"Indeed. However, the servants' hearts are none of our concern, and they would not thank us for our interference. Come, let us leave these fine and noble-hearted men and allow them to attend to their music."

Meya's tone was light, yet Maeneb detected in her mind a certain fear. What could she be afraid of? Perhaps simply of over-stepping some unseen line of etiquette. Meya was doubtless being judged here by all those superior Arch-ladies, just as the Riders were with their mannish clothes and confident informality. In fact, as soon as she thought about it, Maeneb could detect the faint steam of the elder Ladies' disapproval.

A little apart from the others, the lone figure of Gaelera – Nerogun's daughter – was as immobile and expressionless as the footmen. No emotion from Gaelera was detectable. She is the only other silent woman here, thought Maeneb: but she's allowed to be. No-one would dare complain about not being spoken to by *her*.

As the group of women walked away from the musicians, Yaret asked,

"My Lady Meya, are any of your companions here skilled in the arts of medicine?"

Meya looked thoughtful. "I can hardly say so. We have doctors in the city, of course, if you require attention. Forgive me, but I noticed that you limp a little. Is your leg troubling you?"

"From time to time. But a doctor is not what I am thinking of," said Yaret. "Although some salve or ointment might be helpful. So I am wondering about a herb-mistress."

"We have in the castle a herb-master. But if you prefer to consult a woman, he has an assistant. She is not present here, of course, but she is very able in her knowledge of remedies. I can certainly arrange for you to see her, if you wish."

"I shall be very grateful," Yaret said.

"The Lord Huldarion," said Meya cautiously. "He would surely have a herb-master amongst the Riders, would he not? His scars must cause him some discomfort."

"I don't know," said Yaret. "If he feels pain I have never seen it."

"He does feel it," said Maeneb, glad to have some knowledge to offer. "But in general he refuses the use of drugs such as ethlon in case they dull his mind." She thought Huldarion would not mind her saying this to his future wife. It was hardly secret.

Meya smiled faintly. "His mind is very sharp, I think."

"Very," Maeneb said. "A very active mind, behind the scars."

"Yet you would not guess it, to look at his face."

"That is deliberate," said Maeneb, and she would have happily expounded on Huldarion's layers and depths of feeling – she knew their shape and colour, after all, if not their actual contents – had Yaret not interrupted her to say,

"The Riders have a herb-mistress. That's her, over there – Shebel. If she too might meet your medicine-woman, she also is, I mean she will also be gratified to add to her own store of knowledge." Yaret beckoned to Shebel to join them and then began a conversation about herb-gardens as if it was the easiest thing in the world. How did she do it?

Maeneb knew nothing about herb-gardens. The rare chance to talk with confidence, about her own area of knowledge, had passed by. Soon Shebel was arranging a meeting with the castle's herb-mistress: Maeneb felt conspicuously superfluous.

Rather than stand silent, she withdrew from the group. Tiburé was standing with the elder Arch-Ladies: as they glanced across at her, again she felt that cloud of disapproval. Her few remarks to Meya had been something, but not enough. She was failing in her task here.

She looked around for Durba, as a companion in muteness; but Durba sat on a couch next to the thin girl, Sina, gesticulating and mouthing in silent conversation. Sina looked interested rather than appalled at the burden of understanding that the gestures laid upon her. The panic that Maeneb had sensed in her earlier had gone. But Maeneb did not feel able to push in on the pair with her own forced speeches.

Another quarter-hour, thought Maeneb, and then surely I can go. Again, in desperation, she turned to examine the hangings on the wall. She counted threads and stitches.

"You like those, I think."

She spun round. It was the Lady Gaelera who had approached and spoken. It seemed to Maeneb that all the other ladies had moved away a little, as if by accident. Gaelera stood composedly beside her, hands clasped in front of her stomach yet not touching it. Her stiff immaculate dress was so intricately embroidered that she could have stepped in front of the hangings and disappeared into their curlicues.

"The wall-hangings? They are very striking," Maeneb answered.

"In what way?" Was Gaelera smiling? Impossible to tell. Maeneb was not good at reading faces. But Gaelera's mind was no easier to read: it was a blank, bricked wall.

Maeneb was used to putting up her own mental defences – to allow for sleep, for instance, when the minds around her were too loud and busy – but she had never encountered anybody else who thought it necessary. Or even possible. Even Leor did not bother to shield himself from her. She looked at the face above the heavy cloth and wondered that human flesh could be so lacking in apparent life.

Gaelera was still waiting for an answer, like one accustomed to being obeyed.

"The amount of work that has gone into them," said Maeneb, "must be excessive. I mean extreme. I mean–"

"You mean that you admire the effort rather than the skill," Gaelera said.

The polite answer would be that Maeneb admired both. And then she should curtsy and back away from this woman. Both her rank as Nerogun's daughter and her unreadability meant Gaelera was dangerous. Anything untoward that Maeneb said would surely be reported straight to Nerogun.

But Maeneb found lying difficult and was not sure how other people managed it. So she said, "I am sure the skill is great. But it is the effort that astounds me."

"I embroidered this dress I wear," said Gaelera, still expressionless. "Some years ago, when I was young." She made a motion with her hands as if to smooth down her skirts, without actually touching them.



Maeneb looked at the dress and found nothing to say. The pattern confused the eye. It was a maelstrom of twining detail, extraordinary but not beautiful. It was hard to express what the design was meant to depict: were those vines? Shells? Serpents?

But she had to reply.

"I see," was all that she could manage. "Do you sew a lot?"

"It is embroidery, not sewing. Maids do sewing."

"I beg your pardon. My Kelvhan..."

"I embroider every day within my chamber in the south wing."

Maeneb was silent. The deliberation with which Gaelera spoke implied that she was stitching something now: some net, perhaps, made not of thread but of her words.

"Do you wish to know what I embroider?" said Gaelera.

"If you wish to tell me."

"I embroider my life."

The two of them stared at each other. Maeneb was faintly disgusted. What was she supposed to do with that sentence? *I embroider my life*. The theatricality of it.

But it occurred to her that Gaelera was not a theatrical person. She was rather, like Maeneb, a person who did not express herself with ease. And if she was telling Maeneb something then Maeneb ought to listen.

"I do not understand. A life is a difficult thing to embroider," she said.

"I do not find it so."

"Then you are fortunate."

"In some ways," said Gaelera, "yes."

"Do you allow strangers to look on your embroidery?"

For answer the other woman smoothed out her dress again, still without touching it.

"I mean your embroidered life," Maeneb added.

"No. Not yet. It is not yet complete. I might permit you to see a part of it."

Was that an invitation? "I would be honoured."

"You would," Gaelera said. "You may visit me in the south wing if you wish."

Maeneb bowed. When she straightened up, she found that Gaelera had already turned her back and was gliding away.

What had she just agreed to – if anything? Well, at least she had made conversation with a lady, and an important one at that. She'd done her duty, so perhaps now she could leave. When she walked over to Lady Meya, Yaret was already offering her own excuses, which made it simpler.

"I'm afraid I have a very early start tomorrow," Yaret said.

"And I too," Maeneb put in gratefully.

"Ah," said Meya, "perhaps you ride out with the scouts tomorrow morning? I know something of the sort had been arranged."

"Oh no," said Maeneb. "Huldarion sent out scouts a week ago. They should report back soon."

"It has been a delightful evening. I thank you," Yaret said, and bowed. Then she smiled at Janeya and exchanged a word or two of farewell with her. It seemed they had somehow already become friends. How was that possible in the space of an hour?

"I thank you too," said Maeneb. She bowed to Meya – who was frowning slightly, but too bad, there were only the two of them leaving so early – and then since there was nobody for her to exchange a friendly word with, she made for the door.

Of course all the Arch-ladies watched her leave with that faint continuing steam of disapproval. Maeneb didn't care. She'd done enough socialising. Gaelera watched her too, and when she passed, Gaelera raised her right hand a few inches in salute.

So Maeneb made the same brief gesture back. As the footmen opened the huge, carved, double doors for her, she felt a burst of some emotion vibrate across the room.

It came not from Gaelera but from the Arch-ladies and the elder and the lesser ladies; and this time it was not a haze of disapproval. Rather, it was a rush of deep surprise – almost of deep shock.

## Chapter 19

"Come in," said Huldarion.

Meya entered his bed-chamber and closed the door carefully behind her. It was late and he was already disrobed and covered by the heavy dressing-gown, preparing to go to bed. Although he had not expected her tonight, he had hoped that she might come; and despite her somewhat sombre countenance he was very glad to see her.

"How was your evening with the ladies?" he asked her warmly. "I trust the Riders gave no cause for complaint."

"How could they?"

"Their manners and clothes are not what the castle is accustomed to."

"I found their manners and their clothes perfectly acceptable."

He found himself thinking of her clothes; of how he would like to help her remove them, slowly, gently. It would have to be in the dark again, but that hardly mattered. He wondered how she would approach things this time. He was already hardening at the thought.

Meya walked over to him. He took her hand, prepared to raise it to his lips and kiss it. But before he could do so, she led him to the bed. There she shielded the lantern with a swift movement and then sat next to him in the dark. He smiled to the darkness in anticipation. She was silent, as if contemplating.

Huldarion waited. "What would you like to do?" he asked. "Just talk? Or something else?" He felt sure that talk would lead to something else.

"I don't know. I don't know if." He had to bend close to hear her. "I don't think I can do this."

He felt all his anticipation turn its face away. At its back was apprehension. He was almost afraid. He felt ashamed of himself, naked beneath the ugly dressing-gown. And angry: angry with himself as much as her. He should have foreseen that it could never be so simple.

"What has changed?" He had to ask it much more quietly than he wished.

"I've had time to think. Time to see things... and... I find just now that it is difficult to go to bed with you."

She did not say *make love*. Of course they both knew that love had nothing to do with it. It was a bargain, and now she was about to break it. He would have to start all over again with some thin frightened girl, and bear Nerogun's contempt. Or he might not be allowed a second choice at all. He grew cold at the thought.

"What have you had time to see?"

She raised her chin, not looking his way. He could just make out her profile against the glimmer of the lamp.

"How much you calculate," she said. "How everything is a calculation for you."

He was silent for a moment. "I cannot deny that. I am here in Kelvha for a purpose, as you know. But my calculations wish no harm to you or Kelvha. I hope to benefit both."

"You use us."

"And Kelvha uses me. It's politics." He licked his dry lips and quietly asked the question that was thick in his throat. "Does that mean that you cannot go to bed with me, or that you cannot marry me?"

As he waited for her answer he was aware of a pain somewhere. In his heart, perhaps. In his pride, more likely, he admitted to himself. And he feared to see his plans brought down. But maybe a little in his heart as well. Despite the dark, he closed his eyes.

"Oh, I'll marry you," she said, "and once we're married I will not deny you."

He took in a long breath of relief and opened his eyes again to that faint glint of light. "Once we're married you will have every right to deny me, if you wish."

At that she turned her silhouetted head to look at him. "Really? It is not so in Kelvha."

"It will be so with me."

"We sealed our marriage troth that other night. That is unbreakable, for me at least."

"And for me." The pain receded a little.

"Last time was very enjoyable," she said. "Much more than I expected. But I expected nothing. I thought of nothing except my immediate aim."

"Which was?"

She leant her head closer towards him, until it was almost resting on his shoulder. He had to resist the strong urge to put an arm around her. He could make no assumptions now.

She put her lips closer to his ear. Even so, when she replied, it was in so soft a murmur that he could barely hear the words.

"I have a daughter. She's five. I don't want her to grow up here."

So this was the heart of it. Her child was the heart of her.

He turned to reply. His lips were against her cheek, so smooth. Her hair held some faint perfume of soap or flowers. He whispered to the softness of her skin.

"Then she will grow up in Caervonn, if I succeed. And if I don't succeed, there will be some proper home found for her elsewhere amongst the Vonn." Olbeth, he thought. No. Yes. The farm would be a good home for a child. If he failed.

But he did not intend to fail.

"Your daughter shall be forced to no man's will," he told her, trying to load the quiet words with sincerity, "and nor shall you. That shall be part of our bargain. And that part is unbreakable for me. Then our troth stands?"

She sat up straight again. "Yes. It stands. Thank you." He felt her rise to her feet, and then sit down again next to him. "I can't leave so quickly. It would look strange to the watchers."

"We can sit in silence here, or we can talk."

"You're angry with me."

"I was angry, for a moment," he said. "I was afraid. It's not your fault. Love should not have to be a tool."

"Oh, it's always a tool," she said, which made him wonder what her marriage had been like. She immediately answered that. "With my husband... there was, shall I say, no physical reward. The men of Kelvha do not reward their wives in love. Or very rarely. Some are luckier, I daresay. I don't know. No-one talks about it. So bedding him was merely my duty. It kept him content. It made me a good and honoured wife to an honourable man. And he *was* an honourable man. He was without deceit. But to him love was for creating children. So it was a tool, and it served its purpose."

When she added no more, he spoke in turn, his voice as low as hers. "I have had no wife. And before you, only two other women. One was a woman I loved very long ago, more than a lifetime it seems now, before my burns. The other was a brief agreement three years afterwards to check if everything still worked."

"So love was a tool in that relationship."

"Yes, in a way. We agreed that there would be no lasting tie. I have had no other lover since Caervonn fell: at first because of my burns, and then because of my position." He thought of Olvirion, the cousin who had ousted him – a man rumoured to have had several liaisons and possibly even unacknowledged children. Huldarion had been desirous to avoid any such entanglements. "I always knew that I would have to bargain with myself," he said.

"That was always in my calculations. Yet when I chose you I did not calculate at all. Or hardly at all. It was an impulse."

"Hardly at all?" Now she sounded faintly amused. "You're very accurate."

"I try to be."

"I think there is a great deal that you do not say."

This was undoubtedly true. "You think that deceitful?"

Again she sat in silence before murmuring, "I can hardly complain of it, can I, in a place like this? While the hidden spies sit listening. Or trying to listen."

"There will be no spies in Caervonn."

"If you ever get there." She sighed, and then laid her hand upon his leg. Both of them sat still. "It was hardly fair of me," she said, "to come here, having led you to expect what I would not deliver. But I can do something for you."

"There's no need." He felt ashamed, again, of his nakedness and his desire. She was aware of both, for her hand slipped beneath the dressing-gown and held him.

"I know that," she said. It was a ridiculous situation to be in, him sitting on the bed, her hand... oh, but it was such a strong, smooth, caressing hand. As it moved he didn't want to be there and yet he did. He felt himself to be at her mercy. Had she calculated this? Perhaps it served him right for last time. He hadn't really given her much choice then, but to feel pleasure...

Pleasure. He couldn't help himself. He turned towards her and grasped her shoulder, burying his face against her neck.

"More," he said silently. "Harder." But she must have heard, because she obeyed, and he gripped her against his chest. Pleasure. That was all it was. Just pleasure.

He closed his eyes. Who just did what to who? Who just won what, there?

She kissed him gently, on the scarred cheek. "Does that hurt? The scar?"

"Nothing hurts just now," he said. "But yes. In general it does hurt."

She made no sympathetic noises. But her hands were still there, one on his body, one on his cheek, soft now, a reassurance that he did not actually repel her. She had not pulled away.

"It has another effect," he said after a while. This was something he had often thought and never voiced before. "Because it can be painful for me to move my face, I limit my facial expressions. I can't smile or frown without it hurting. And sometimes I think that I feel less emotion for that reason: as if I could not feel happy without physically smiling. As if the smile caused the happiness."

"Perhaps it does. And so, instead, you calculate?"

"I think I always did that, even as a boy. But maybe I rely more on my calculations and less on my feelings to make decisions. I just didn't calculate on you."

"You relied on your feelings when you chose me?"

"On my instinct, perhaps. I thought you would be sensible. I liked your independence. I knew you would not be afraid of me. You attracted me from the moment I first saw you scolding that unfortunate servant boy."

She laughed and then sobered, lowering her voice again. "That was no joke for that poor boy."

"Is he in trouble?"

"Nothing to do with you."

"I imagine Nerogun has a way with sloppy servants."

"You might say that."

Their dislike of Nerogun was a common ground. But he did not explore it. He did not want the Post-Regent anywhere near his bed. And now she took her hands away and found a cloth to wipe him clean, making him feel ashamed a third time. She was the one in control. She stood up, kissed his head and left, finding her way out of the room in the dark without even stumbling into any of the furniture.

He sat there on the bed alone and wondered.

Meya would still marry him. He would not have the dreadful task of trying to choose another wife; or the worse humiliation of not being allowed to.

She would marry him. But he took nothing else for granted now. He thought he did not understand any of what had just happened. Perhaps she had calculated that.

After a while he nodded into the darkness of the room. Marriage to Meya would not be simple. But it would be interesting. They were well matched, indeed.

## **Chapter 20**

Yaret awoke to the faint sound of snoring.

That was Durba, lying on the bunk below. But as she listened carefully to the breathing of the other women, the soft, slow hushings rippling through the cool air of the attic, she was convinced that they too were asleep. Like an animals' den, she thought. It is the comfort of family; even for Maeneb.

Now it was time for her to leave the den. Yaret had set herself to sleep for four hours, and from the position of the moon glimpsed through the window she thought she had got it about right. So she gathered up her clothes and wooden foot, and as before crept out of the dormitory into the corridor before she donned them.

Again she listened before proceeding. Nobody else was stirring when she tiptoed down the narrow stairs. As quietly as possible, she let herself out of the lodging house and into the cold and dark.

This was deeper night than last time she'd crept out into the city: no glimmer of dawn yet sang in the sky, no early workers trudged the gloomy streets. It would have been difficult to get through the West Gate unchallenged if that were what she wanted.

But although her destination was the same as last time – the bath-house by the northern wall – Yaret was not planning to go out through the gate. Instead she walked, or rather, sidled, drifted, slid along the dark and almost silent streets of Kelvha City, avoiding the flickering lamps and wandering revellers, and instead picking narrower, winding alleyways wherever she could. She checked her direction by the moon every few minutes: and more often than that, she checked behind her.

Needlessly. For once she had left the main road to the gate, there was nobody else afoot. These streets were almost silent; though not quite. She heard the distant intermittent rumble of some cart, and drunken shouts, the words all lost. Closer to her, after she had walked a little way, the quiet was punctuated by odd snores and groans. These became more frequent the further north she got: she saw the huddled shapes of outdoor sleepers bunched against the walls and in the doorways.

And suddenly there were more shouts, close by this time, and the sounds of running feet. Yaret drew back into the shadows of a rickety wooden tenement, and crouched against its wall, copying the indistinct bundle that was snoring loudly a few yards away. Be a beggar, she adjured herself, a mere sleeping shape, a nobody, a nothing in the shadows...

She was reminded of the Darkburn. Both the forest, and its namesake creature, first seen crawling through the trees, burning, hating, hunting, seeking to bring death. That terrible encounter had felt like the end of everything – and yet in some ways it had been the start of everything. The start of this new life, at least; and she ought to be grateful to have gained it. To own any life at all.

Perhaps she was a fool to use it in this way. Seeking out another darkburn. But the one here in the city was smaller and would be captive, harmless; it wasn't prowling through the streets. As she pretended to curl up in sleep three figures sped past her down the road, their feet pounding. Soon she heard more shouts, though thankfully they seemed to be a street or two away. But they acted as reminders that caution was necessary even when her path seemed empty.

After a moment she stood up and looked behind her, for the hundredth time, before resuming walking. But unlike on her previous walk around the wall, she had no inner sense of being followed.

On reaching the deserted market, she threaded cautiously between the stalls. Some had sleeping men and dogs lying underneath them and she moved away quickly from the threatening snarls that came from one dark trestle.

Continuing north, she avoided Beery Row – that seemed to be the source of the distant drunken shouting; and now there was a lot of singing, voices echoing brokenly and unintelligibly between the ramshackle buildings. Yaret took the same route that Tiburé had chosen, heading towards where she hoped the northern wall would be. Just as she was beginning to wonder if she had lost her bearings, she recognised the junction where the crossing-sweeper had sworn at her. The wall loomed high above, a bank of shadow.

So over to her right was the top end of Old Tanneries Street, and the Temple of Borgun. From that direction came a small but vigorous amount of rowdiness: there was an echoing crash, expostulations, some aggrieved slurred argument. Yaret steered away and with another glance around – not a soul in sight – she followed the heavy outline of the wall, its bulk sharply visible against the moonlit clouds.

And here was the bridge. As she crossed it she was able to follow her other senses. Not only her nose told her she was getting close – the stink of darkburn mingling with the sewers – but so did her feeling of increasing apprehension. Fear. Dread. Horror. Blackness everlasting...

Yaret stopped for several seconds, leaning on the wall, gathering her mental strength. This ought to be getting easier by now. But for some reason it felt worse than last time. Maybe it was because she was alone and in the dark.

Eventually she made herself move on, fighting the increasing urge to run back and throw herself off the bridge into oblivion or hurl herself against the unforgiving wall. *Death. Find me death.* Knowing that it was the darkburn creating all these feelings did not help in any great degree. She felt the horror and the will to die as if they were her own.

But it meant that she was very close. That must be the bath-house just ahead, its entrance lit by a single lamp, a pale glow like a flower blooming in a field of blackness. The bath-house doors were closed; and before them, one on either side, their helmets gleaming in the lamplight, there stood a pair of guards.

Staying in the deep shadow on the far side of the road, she silently skirted past the pool of light. One of the guards yawned, and muttered something to the other: he sounded half-asleep.

"Wake up," said the second sharply. "You never know when they'll arrive. I wish they would: I need a break. This place gets me down something dreadful."

"We'll hear them coming," said the first, and yawned again.

Hear who coming? wondered Yaret. Did he mean more carts containing mutilated stonemen, arriving on the far side of the wall? If so, she thought, the guards might have to enter the bath-house to supervise the entrance on the outer side. That would give her a chance to move towards the door.

She had no intention of trying to go in. She simply wanted to get as close to the darkburn as she could without being seen. But she did not know exactly where within this place it was. So once she was beyond the guards and their lamplight, she crossed the street and approached the wall of the bath-house, a black shadow, feeling its smooth brick with her hands. Surely it was warmer than it ought to be... How close was the darkburn that was imprisoned behind it?



*Close*, judging by the undiminished sense of dread. Despair, such despair... Spreading her fingers against the wall, Yaret concentrated her thoughts on the interior. Although she could not sing aloud to the darkburn here, as she had when it was first dragged to Kelvha in its iron cart, she could attempt to think a song at it. It might be a stupid idea; but if the darkburn could emanate feelings through brick walls, why should it not receive them too?

She visualised the lutine, back in the attic, nestling at the end of her bunk. Bought for two drebs from a junk-shop, it was her new most precious possession – if she could only get it strung. But now she played it in her head for accompaniment as she thought about a song of Madeo's, and then began to sing it silently, letting the notes and words weave together. The tune the warp, the words the weft. She drew the cloth of song out in her mind.

At the same time she tried to register the feelings that came through the wall, to see if they would change their tone or colour. No: there was still just dread, flooding through everything, a dark tide lapping at the street. No detail to distinguish. She wished that she was Maeneb... But Maeneb had said she could not read the darkburn's mind.

I'm a fool to imagine that I can, thought Yaret. None the less, I need to try.

Her silent song came to its silent end. There was the faint echo of voices somewhere behind her, but it was at least two streets away. Another distant rattle of some horses or a cart; another yawning grumble, as the two guards murmured to each other. Yaret stayed where she was, pressing herself more closely to the brick – yes, it was definitely warm. After thinking of a different song, she began to try again. Was that some change in the despair that she detected? Was it a response?

And then without warning, without sound, a hand was clamped hard across her mouth as if to silence the unspoken words, and an iron arm was round her body, pulling her inexorably away from the wall.

She struggled to escape but both arm and hand were too strong for her. Whoever had hold of her did not seem to be a great deal taller than she was herself, but had a grip like steel. When she tried to tug away the hand that sealed her mouth she could not. When she tried to kick, her foot met someone's leg without effect. Although she feared making any noise lest it attract the guards, she found there was little noise that she could make in any case.

With no more than the merest scuffle she was being dragged – almost carried – away from the bath-house, back across the street and down some hidden alleyway. A footpad, she thought, a robber, rapist; and when she heard the growing clatter of hooves approaching down the road she struggled again to get free so that she could run out to the horsemen for help.

"Be quiet," hissed a low voice in her ear. "You know me."

It was Veron.

Yaret stopped struggling. Instead she stood tense and motionless in his unyielding grip as three horses rode past the entrance to their alley. A torch was held aloft: she glimpsed the riders' heads – two helmeted Kelvhan soldiers and one middle-aged man with a heavy, suspicious face.

If she had still been out there by the bath-house wall the soldiers would have seen her. She would have been trapped in the torch-light with nowhere to run.

"Stay here," said Veron. When he released her she did not move, but watched him slide like a shadow through the alley's entrance. She heard the horses' hooves move on and stop. A command was given, its words inaudible but their imperious nature clear. There was the muffled clang of a gate unlocking: the shuffle of men dismounting: footsteps: and the glow of torchlight disappeared. Again, silence.

Veron was at her side once more. "This way." He held her arm, not quite so hard this time, but hard enough, and led her further down the alley. After emerging at its far end they crossed the next street – lightless, with uneven cobbles – and dived into another, more tortuous ginnel that wound between damp-smelling, crumbly walls. Towards the end of this passage he pushed her through a doorway.

The door closed behind him. It was cold and faintly echoey. She heard a flint being struck and a few seconds later the space around her flickered into view.

Planks were stacked against one wall, bales of canvas against another; in between them, heavy spirals of coarse rope were piled up. A storeroom. Veron steered Yaret with a push so that she sat down abruptly on a heap of fat rope coils.

She gathered that Veron was not impressed. He stood over her and stared down with coldly narrowed eyes. No trace of a smile.

"Well?" he said.

No point saying, *well, what?* So she replied, "I just wanted to work out where it was." It sounded lame. But there was no point in mentioning the silent singing either. That was a ridiculous enough thing to do, let alone to try and explain to anybody else.

"You already knew where it was."

"I wanted to see what the situation was at the bath-house."

"You saw it. Two guards at all times: regular visitors at night. That was Nerogun, the Post-Regent, who turned up just now and nearly caught you."

"That's Nerogun? The man in charge of Kelvha? What was he doing there?" she asked, startled.

"Overseeing the torture of the prisoners, I expect."

"Oh. Those stonemen."

"So you know that too." Veron still fixed her with a piercing gaze as if he would look right through her.

She thought, with an odd thump of her heart, Veron is the only Rider of whom I am actually afraid. I ought not to be; but I am. He would kill me now if he decided it was necessary. Cut my throat without a qualm. Regardless of my petitioning the huntress: she would not save me. If I were to petition her now, it's not my side that she'd be on.

Although she felt a shiver trace its way along her spine, she kept her eyes steadily on Veron. "Yes, I know that too. Are you surprised?"

"On the contrary." Taking something from beneath his cloak, he tossed it to the floor in front of her. She saw that it was in fact two objects: a pair of spoons, each with a lump of gum attached.

"Where did you expect to get keys made?" he demanded.

"I... don't know. I didn't think that far ahead."

He waited. Then, when she said no more, he went on roughly, "Maybe just as well. If you'd tried to think that far ahead, you could be in the bath-house now, undergoing death by darkburn. Break those up."

"What?"

"Break the moulds up."

"But they–"

"Do it."

She picked up a spoon and prised off the gum. It had set hard and had an unpleasantly greasy feeling. After managing to break each mould in half, she dropped the pieces on the floor – the second spoon too – and Veron walked over and put his heel on them, grinding them into shapeless lumps.

"You can go home as soon as it starts to get light," he said. "Take the spoons."

She put them in her pocket. "Well, what were you doing here, if it comes to that?" she countered, her courage returning a little now that she judged he wasn't going to kill her. Yet for a moment it had seemed entirely possible.

"I was following you."

"But how did you know I was out?"

"I watched you leave the lodging house," he said.

"What – and you followed me all the way here? But I kept checking," said Yaret in disbelief. "I didn't see you."

"Of course you didn't."

Some light dawned. "That other morning; you followed me around the outer wall then, too, didn't you? And you saw me hide the spoons."

"That was Edrik," said Veron.

She decided to feel indignant. It was better than feeling afraid and ashamed of her own incompetence. "So who else are you following around?"

"Everybody. Everyone who leaves the castle late at night. Everyone who creeps around the Riders' lodgings, or goes off to dubious places. Everyone who isn't where we expect them to be."

"Who is *We*?"

"Me and my hunters."

She reflected on this. "Zan needs more practice," she said after a while.

"So do you. You wander round these streets like a bewildered cow in a field."

Yaret began to relax a little. "What are you going to do about the darkburn?" she asked.

"Watch," he said, "and wait."

"If the Kelvhans are using it for torture–"

"We can't stop them. It would only anger them. What *were* you doing by the wall just now? Looking for another way in? There is none."

"I was trying to speak to it," she said.

Veron sat down on another pile of rope opposite her. Although his face was still keen, it was more interested than fierce.

"How?"

"By singing at it. In my head. I know it sounds stupid, but when the darkburn was being transported here from the battlefield I rode behind the cart and sang to it, and I think it heard me." She tried to describe the strange shift in feeling that had emanated from the captive darkburn.

"You think that it responds to music, or to words?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe just to the feeling behind them. So I thought that if I sang to it inside my head, it might detect that, even through a wall..."

"Why?"

"I want to try and understand it," said Yaret.

He shook his head. "I doubt if the darkburn can be understood. It's not a living creature. It exists by different rules to us, and we don't know what they are."

"Then we should be trying to find out."

"And getting burnt alive in the process."

"Would the huntress understand it better?"

"No." His reply was immediate and firm. "Don't speak of her."

"I will not say her name," she promised. "But, Veron... I felt her presence, not far from here. It was on the day of the tournament, fleetingly. She – she passed over me. It was..."

How to describe that sudden shattering weakness? That overwhelming sense of a power so much greater than her own?

But there was no need to describe that to Veron. She found herself wondering how much it took out of him to be the partner of the huntress.

"She was called." Was that a hint of longing in his voice?

"Not by me," said Yaret.

"No. Nor me. She was called to the jousting field by her kin. Where were you when you felt her?"

"I was in the temple of Borgun."

At that Veron drew a long breath. "I heard about your visit there, although not from her. Come," he said, and standing up he beckoned to Yaret to follow him across the storeroom and out through a far door. There was a passage – also stacked with planks and wooden canes – and at its end, a window, shuttered. A man knelt there: when he turned, she recognised one of the hunters, a taciturn man called Garnuk. In the centre of each shutter was a triangular hole; he had had his eye to one.

"Anything?" asked Veron. Garnuk shook his head.

Veron turned to Yaret. "Look through," he said.

When she obeyed she saw a street draped in the blue-grey beginnings of daylight. A shabby street, one or two men just appearing from doorways. Workmen. One of the buildings was familiar. It was the Temple of Borgun.

"The priest there was sent word," said Veron, "a second, false, code-word, as well as the one you gave him. If any visitor gives him the wrong word, he will tell me."

"But in any case, you have set your spies here."

For the first time, Veron smiled. He looked like a wolf.

"Everywhere," he said.

## Chapter 21

"I'm so glad he's chosen you," Janeya said, with heartfelt sincerity in her voice. "I know you'll make him a good wife. And I'm sure he'll be an excellent husband."

"You mean you're glad he didn't choose you instead," said Meya. "Yet everyone expected him to pick you if he did not wish for Idria."

She sat down next to Janeya on the window seat in the Ladies' Gallery. They could be seen by anyone out in the courtyard, of course; but for some reason, there was no spyhole at this end of the room. Perhaps the window was considered security enough. Meya wondered if ladies were expected not to realise that they could conspire in full view just as easily as huddled in some secret corner.

At any rate, they could not be overheard. And the discussion she wanted to have with Janeya was not a safe one for anybody else to hear.

Now she studied the younger woman with affection and concern. She had always thought Janeya beautiful, far more so than she was herself; but she also felt that Janeya was more loving, more tolerant than she was, as strong and supple in her mind as in her body. She had intelligence. A perfect choice for queen.

And yet Huldarion had not picked her. Meya found herself surprised by it all over again; for he could not have known that Janeya did not want to be chosen.

"So, what about you, Janeya?" she said cautiously. "The time is ripe for you to marry, and if you have any lord in mind that might suit you, I will have a little influence now; for a while, at least."

Janeya shook her head and looked out of the window. "No lord," she said. "No lord."

Meya sighed. Her affection had an overlay of exasperation. Janeya might be intelligent and loving; but she was also idealistic. She wanted the world to be different and thought that she could make it so by wanting. "That serving-boy?" she said.

"He's not a boy. Lorolo is a man."

"If one glance from you can make him drop a whole pile of plates, he is a boy who needs a little more maturity and self-control."

"He loves me," said Janeya, her voice singing with emotion. "And I love him. I'm sure Huldarion's a very fine person – but his arrival here, and my being put forward as a possible bride, has made me realise that Lorolo is the only one I want. Lorolo is a wonderful man. He's generous and kind and brave and I don't care about his rank."

"But everybody else does care." Meya tried to speak with calm authority, and not to show the exasperation that she felt. "Janeya, this cannot happen. You cannot allow yourself to become attached to a servant. You are the niece of the Keeper of the Keys, one of the highest nobles in the kingdom. If your uncle Melegan suspects anything amiss, Lorolo will be sent away in disgrace. And if Nerogun finds out – which stars forbid – he'll be flayed to within an inch of his life first."

"What for? For loving me?" demanded Janeya.

"Are you sure Lorolo loves you? He makes doe-eyes at every woman that he serves a dish to." Meya knew she was being brutal, but she had to bring Janeya to her senses. She could see the attraction – the boy had big, dreamy eyes and a way of looking at you that made you feel quite... buoyant. She was not entirely immune to it herself. No doubt, she thought, it was partly a result of his upbringing in the south, where manners were freer than here, and partly the young man's natural desire to please, but it had a tumultuous effect on Janeya. "You haven't spoken any more to him since you first told me all about it, have you?"

"Of course I have! How could I not speak to Lorolo? When he's been so gentle and so sympathetic--"

"Sympathetic? What about?"

"About the fact I can't choose who I marry. He's seen me looking sad and he says he's thought so much about me, all the time. We've had so many talks--"

"When? Where?"

"Every morning. In the linen rooms."

"Dear stars," said Meya in horror. "You can't. You must stop at once." She found herself wishing that Janeya had never confided in her. It filled her with a dreadful sense of responsibility for the girl, and an even worse sense of apprehension about what might happen if Janeya did not break up this liaison. "You don't even know this boy," she expostulated. "You don't know what he's like."

"I do. He's lovely, Meya. I love him. It shouldn't matter that he's a servant. I thought that if you're queen, I mean once you're queen at Caervonn, couldn't you send for me to be your lady in waiting, and then Lorolo can come too, and we can be wed?"

"And what would your uncle say to that? You would be disowned. Outcast – an exile."

"I don't mind that."

"You would. And that is the least that could happen: your relatives might hunt Lorolo down and bring you back to Kelvha as a widow." Meya shook her head. "Janeya, I can help you, but not in that way. Trust me – you have to forget Lorolo. I can arrange for him to be transferred out of the castle, with good reports, to Marne or somewhere else--"

"But Marne is forty miles away!"

"Exactly." She took hold of the girl's shoulders with firm compassion. "Janeya, believe me, that is the best thing I can do for you. And for him."

"It's the worst thing you could do for me!"

"You will thank me in another year."

"A year!" Janeya's voice was high. "No, I will never thank you if you have him sent away. I will never forgive you. We love each other, and that outweighs all else." Although tears stood in her eyes, she did not weep, nor did she protest any further. She stood up from the window-seat, shook out her skirts, and swept from the room.

Meya sat alone, thinking. She would have to arrange for Lorolo's removal. Janeya would truly not forgive her, she reflected, and she regretted that; but it was better than the alternative. For Janeya, the liaison could result only in shame – for Lorolo, potentially much worse.

She did not know exactly what the punishment was for a footman who transgressed in such a way: but rebellious serving-men – and serving-girls – had, on occasion, been found at the bottom of the Tell Tower, their bodies broken by the hundred-foot fall from the locked room at the tower's summit. Supposedly they had jumped. Meya thought it unlikely that they all had.

Janeya would always be rebellious, though. Meya sighed. She had been so herself, ten years ago. She had refused three husbands – including Inigun – before the age of twenty.

I was lucky my father was indulgent, she thought now. But I'm sure Inigun was relieved when I refused him that first time. He only asked me to marry him because it was my father's wish. And of course he wanted to benefit from my father's patronage. No shame in that: it is the way of Kelvha. Such an upright man Inigun was. So stiff and proper. Yet when he was with my father, discussing military history or playing battleboard, he seemed to come alive.

She had refused him courteously enough, on the grounds of the age gap; for Inigun was a full dozen years older than she was.

"But that gap will narrow," said her father the next day, "with every year. By the time you're my age it won't matter."

Meya did not see how he could be sure of that, given that his own wife was already dead. Briya had been older than him, and had been ill for years before she died. Impatient at the doctors' helpless shakes of their heads about her mother's illness, the teenage Meya had set out to befriend the herb-master's assistant – a deferential, knowledgeable if low-born woman – and to learn all she could of medicines, herbs and remedies. None of those, she thought regretfully, prolonged her mother's life, but they had made her last few months a little easier.

And in the dark days after her mother's inevitable death, the first maidservants had come knocking tentatively on Meya's door. Could she help a servant with the toothache? With a strange rash? With a bad leg? With a – nervously whispered – desire not to become pregnant, although a young lord kept insisting on, you know, and she was afraid to deny him?

Meya did what she could with all of these. She kept things brisk and factual with the maidservants, giving them a stern look if they stepped beyond their station: but she was not unkind. And she was discreet. What they told her, she told no-one else. And more servants came with their illnesses and problems and their despair and trust.

Meanwhile, Inigun was playing battleboard with her father. Nobody else offered marriage for her after she was twenty. Despite her aristocratic bearing she was already a little heavy, a little dark, and above all a little peremptory for a high noble's prospective wife.

And in truth none of the high nobles of the right age attracted her greatly. She admitted to herself that this was not their fault: she was not allowed to get to know them except through the formal ceremonies of receptions, banquets, dances and the like. So much of male life was hidden from her. She wasn't greatly bothered because she had a full life anyway. She was busy running her own household and, increasingly, advising other housekeepers in the castle. She became aware that amongst the servant class, at least, she was acquiring authority and a reputation for good sense.

But a reputation in the servants' hall counted for nothing. By twenty-three she was also aware that her status in the castle hierarchy would start to fall away soon if she remained unmarried. She had perhaps two years before she would become very anxious for a husband; and when Inigun offered for her again, having shown no interest in the intervening years beyond meticulous politeness, she accepted him. And, gratifyingly, she thought that this time he was relieved when she accepted.

Certainly her father was delighted. "He'll get promotion now," he said, and indeed that immediately happened. At the next border action Inigun commanded his own brigade, and with honour: a serious, uncompromising soldier, people said, always planning many moves ahead as if it were a game of battleboard.

At home, he played or talked military strategy with her father Borovin deep into the night. He came to her bed dutifully, but only once a month; hence it took a few years before their child arrived.

Once, she had walked into the game room to see her father's hand upon Inigun's thigh as he explained some arcane move of the battleboard soldiers. When she approached, he removed it without embarrassment; but since then, she had sometimes wondered if the friendship between her husband and her father might have become more than manly regard, if such a thing had been possible in Kelvha.

But it was not possible for them to even think of it. A hand on the other's arm when they met; a clap on the shoulder when they parted. A touch on the leg during a game of battleboard. Anything more between them could not be acknowledged even to themselves. Liaisons between noble males were very rare, and the consequences terrible.

In any case, her marriage reduced the possibility of that sort of gossip, and she was glad that it was so. She enjoyed the running of the expanded household with her new status as a married woman. She saw to it that the many-storeyed house where they all lived was managed well, the servants kept obedient and content, good food and drink supplied, the frequent ceremonies at the Castle carefully fulfilled. It was not difficult. She liked things to be in order, and Inigun appreciated the routine. It was something of a shock when she realised she was pregnant.

A son would have been better, of course: but Inigun, to his credit, showed no regret, only satisfaction at becoming a father. Meya felt no such pleasure in being a mother. Childbirth was painful, exhausting and somewhat horrifying: and afterwards she looked down at the baby in weary bewilderment. What was she supposed to do with it? Where was the love that was meant to spring into her heart?

But the midwife – low-born, of course, but efficient – studied Meya as she lay in bed, the strange baby making noises next to her, and said, “If you don’t take to her straight away, my lady, don’t worry. Just pretend. The baby won’t know any different.”

I’m good at that, thought Meya, at pretending. At being a loving and compliant wife and daughter whose opinions don’t matter.

But isn’t that what I am? Am I not an obedient wife and daughter?

No. I hide myself; I put on an act. I do it well.

At that moment she realised the truth about herself. And with that realisation, she decided that she could pretend to be a mother: a loving, doting mother, cooing and caressing, as if little Aliya were the apple of her eye. She was not an objectionable baby, after all, despite her habit of crying through the night. Even so, at those times Meya chose to hold her rather than hand her to the nursing-maid. Pretending to love her.

One of those nights, about three months in, she was holding the crying Aliya to her shoulder, almost asleep herself, waiting for the gurgle and snort that signified peace for another hour or two; and when it came, she laid the baby in her cradle saying, “There you go, little one, sleep soundly now;” and then was amazed at the tenderness in her own voice. Maybe she felt something for this little bundle after all. Maybe it was not all just pretence.

A month later, she could hardly bear to put the baby down. A year later, she would have given up her life to protect her daughter from any harm. When her husband died, felled in some unnecessary distant battle, she grieved sincerely for him, but was heart-broken because Aliya would now never know her father.

Nor her grandfather. Meya’s father died a few months after Inigun: his heart gave up, they said, and she believed it. Inigun’s death had killed all joy in him, all sense of purpose. He tried to do his own pretending, but she saw his emptiness with compassion and despite her efforts to give him comfort had no power to fill the void. He could find no will to live in his daughter or grand-daughter, because to him women had no meaning. They could be important only as conveyors, witnesses, facilitators. In themselves they could be nothing.

But she was something. She vowed that regardless of her widowhood she would make herself into something, would find herself some role; and she succeeded. She moved into the Castle where the single ladies had their quarters: in their case, it was to protect them from the outside world; in her case, so that she could supervise the Castle’s goings-on more closely.



And the Castle needed supervision. The maids to whom she offered medicine murmured of trouble in the kitchens and the corridors, of over-bearing footmen and rebellious cooks. She learnt from the frazzled chief housekeeper that the head of the servants' hall – an annoying, puffed-up man who walked with his feet turned out – was not doing his job. Instead of organising the running of the Castle he was raiding the wine cellars and bullying the lower orders.

Meya called him up before the Keeper of the Keys and confronted him with his sins. When the man resigned she suggested a replacement: a quiet, thorough man – not a Kelvhan, but she managed to get him appointed anyway because Lord Melegan would rather not concern himself with such tedious things. Meya was unofficially in charge. Nobody objected because things ran so smoothly.

Now that she was to be married, she reflected, they would have to learn to do without her. But first, a new place must be found for Lorolo.

Best done sooner than later. Meya stood up and left the Ladies' Gallery to cross the courtyard and wend down gloomy passages to the servants' hall. It was the best source of information about whereabouts in Outer Kelvha, and beyond, staff might be needed. So many of the servants came from far outside the city that they had more knowledge of distant vacancies than she did.

But when she entered the great kitchen, there was a ruckus. The second cook was shouting at a scullery-maid across a ream of pastry sheets, and the other kitchen-maids were trying to intervene, all very loudly. It took a moment for Meya's presence to be noticed and to calm the storm.

"She's just been sick in the butter-churn. It's the usual trouble," declared the second cook, Hilfa, a tough woman with arms like tree roots. "The stupid, thoughtless girl."

"I couldn't help it," sobbed the scullery-maid. The other girls at once agreed with her vociferously.

"You could help it happening in the first place," scolded Hilfa.

"You think it's easy to stop them, just because it never happens to you!" protested one.

"Who says it's never happened to me?" countered the cook. "Not recently, I grant. But you just have to be firm with them."

"How can I be firm, when he says he'll have me thrown out of the castle?" wailed the scullery-maid. Her face was streaked with tears and vomit.

"You'll get thrown out anyway once it starts to show," said Hilfa roughly.

"Enough," said Meya, and they all fell silent once again. She took the scullery-maid aside into the pantry to question her. Her name was Felipa, and it was indeed the usual trouble, although Felipa would not name the man. A young lord, too high-born to be gainsaid.

"You should have asked me for callaret," said Meya sternly.

"But it was already too late! I didn't know that he was going to... And then I kept hoping he wouldn't want to do it again."

Meya sighed. "How far on are you?" she asked the girl. "Three months? Very well. You will have to leave the castle in the next few weeks. I'll seek out a post for you in Outer Kelvha. There are often dairy jobs on the farmsteads, and you may be allowed to keep your baby if you wish."

"I don't wish," hiccupped Felipa. "I don't want the baby."

"Whether you want it or not, you're going to have it," said Meya firmly, although not unkindly, "and you can't have it here. I'll talk to you again in a week or two. In the meantime try not to throw up in front of Hilfa. Stay out of her way if you can."

She left the girl and went to speak to the cook, to ask her – no, command her – to be more gentle with the girls who got themselves in trouble.

“I can’t be doing with it,” said Hilfa, hands on her bony hips.

“Nor can I,” said Meya, “but I’ll sort Felipa out.”

“And my butter-churn?”

However, that complaint was only muttered. As Meya left the kitchen, she shook her head in resignation. If only she *could* sort it out, once and for all. If she were Nerogun she’d make short work of all those careless, lusty lordlings...

But Nerogun had more important matters to think about than pregnant scullery-maids. He had a war on his hands: men’s matters. So it was up to her.

## Chapter 22

Leor was feeling queasy. The odours of the fish market didn't help; but they weren't the cause of the problem. Its underlying reason was the shielding spell. It was very different to the little melding and concealing charms which he allowed himself occasionally to indulge in.

It was so long since he'd performed such powerful magic for more than a few moments that he wasn't used to its effects. Raising the darkburn from the pit on the battlefield up north had reminded him of just how strong his powers were.

But Leor was out of practice. His blurring of his identity in the tavern had been a shallow spell, with little effort required. Now, after just one morning of more complete concealment, he felt like an athlete who had returned to running after a year spent lying on a couch. He hadn't expected this constant strain and tension, which resulted in an anxious nausea. He felt sea-sick, as if the crowds around the market were swarming shoals of fish and he was in some uncontrolled fast-bobbing boat amidst them.

"You're sure you can't feel my presence?" he muttered to Maeneb. He had to repeat himself before she gave a small start and replied.

"Yes, I'm quite sure. I'm not conscious of your mind at all. It's very effective. I almost forgot that you were there until you spoke."

"Good. But I don't know how much longer I can keep it up for."

"I expect you'll get used to it," said Maeneb.

"And when you look at me, what do you see?"

But Maeneb had already turned away as if she didn't hear the question. It was Yaret who answered.

"Just a man not worth looking twice at. Nothing remarkable about you: no red hair, no white streaks, no outlandish clothes."

"I wasn't aware my clothes were outlandish," said Leor, a little startled.

"All of our clothes are, to the Kelvhans. But you just seem... Inconspicuous isn't quite the right word. Hard to see. My gaze seems to skate off you. It's difficult to remember that you're there. I have to keep reminding myself."

"Mmm," said Durba, in what was apparently agreement.

"Well, that's something," said Leor glumly, as he walked on through the fish-market. People didn't look up at him as they normally would. Usually his height ensured attention; yet on this occasion nobody gave him a glance or stepped out of his way. "But you can see me all right?" he said.

"What?" said Maeneb. "Oh, yes. There you are. Sort of."

"There's almost a shimmer about you," Yaret added, "like a mirage."

That wasn't so good. Leor tried to steady himself, to hold the shield in place, but another wave of sickness threw itself at him and sent him lurching into a shellfish stall.

"Watch where you're going!" said the stall-owner. His indignant look shifted off Leor to rest on Maeneb.

"Sorry," she said to him, and then to Leor, "See? It works."

"I need to sit down," said Leor. "But not next to fish."

Yaret – who seemed to know her way around – led them out of the market and up a narrow street. It opened out into a wider cobbled square where a rare stand of trees provided shade over a bench. There were few trees in Kelvha city, and he sat down gratefully beneath the rustling branches and tried to recover. Taking deep breaths,

he watched the passers-by, who were mainly children. They were streaming into a long low building with their bags and other gear. It was a school, then.

"Excuse me," said Yaret, stepping over to greet one of the oldest children, a boy of about twelve, "could you help me, if you please? I see you carry a lutine. Can you tell me where you buy the strings?"

When the boy paused, looking at her in some surprise, she explained. "We're strangers here. I've recently acquired a lutine but I don't know where to get it strung."

"Oh! Are you the Vonn?" The boy stared at them with interest mingled with some doubt. While Maeneb and Durba were unmistakeably Vonnish in both their looks and clothing, Yaret might have been some country youth. And as for Leor himself, he saw the boy's gaze slide off him just as Yaret had described.

"Some of us are Vonn," she said.

"Do you know the man who killed the tiger?" the boy asked eagerly.

"We do."

"I wish I'd seen that! I bet it was amazing. There's a music shop in the Turners' Square, West Quarter."

"Thank you. One other thing may I ask, if you might be so kind," said Yaret in her slightly erratic Kelvhan. "In your school, do you have a hob?"

"A hob?" The boy looked blank.

"In my country we would also call it a lin," she said, smiling. "A small creature that is hard to see, that some would say is not there at all, but that may be sometimes noticed for a moment around the door or stove--"

"Oh! You mean a bunno?" the boy said, and laughed. "Yes, we have one of those. The little ones swear it's there, anyway. But it hides whenever you look at it. I used to believe in it myself, when I was young. Do you have those stories in your country too?"

"Our bunno turned itself into a lump of wood," said Yaret. "What about yours?"

"I used to think it was a chair," the boy said readily enough.

"That's interesting. Thank you. Don't let us make you late."

But he lingered a moment longer. "Will there be any more tiger fights, do you think?"

"I doubt it."

"That's a shame," he said, saluted them and left, swinging his lutine case.

"What was all that about hobs and bunnos?" asked Leor.

"I'm interested in them, that's all." Yaret eyed him curiously. "I should really pick your brains about them, Leor. You ought to know all about hobs and lins, if anybody does."

"Not really. I only know what people say about them." Leor took a deep breath, trying to quell the rising tide of sickness. How did Adon cope with this nausea, if he shielded himself all the time? Maybe Adon didn't feel it. Or was used to it. Or took a drug for it...

He pulled his attention back to lins. Strange things. Always on the edge of consciousness, as if they were dreamt.

"I tried to make a lin appear once," he remembered. "That was years ago. I thought I'd seen something turn into a stone, so I commanded it to turn itself back."

Yaret had started slightly at the sound of his voice. She narrowed her eyes as if trying to bring him into focus. "And what happened?" she asked.

"Nothing happened." He shrugged. "Whatever lins are – if they exist – they weren't subject to my magic. Or not to that particular spell, and I don't know what other sort would work. They're probably not subject to the natural laws of earth at all."

"But you are?" asked Yaret. "Your magic is subject to the natural laws?"

"After a fashion." Leor rubbed his forehead. "Can we stop talking, please? I just want to sit quietly for a while."

"Then I'll go off and buy my strings," said Yaret. "Durba? Would you like to come with me?"

The younger girl nodded. Reaching forward, she patted Leor on the arm. "B... b... b..."

"You'll be better in a while," said Yaret. Durba nodded.

Leor supposed he would be. He could always drop the shielding spell if it got too bad; but he felt an almost superstitious fear of doing that.

Adon, he thought, I am frightened of Adon. I know he is somewhere in this city because who else could have taken on Huldarion's guise? And if Adon were near he could probably find me in a moment. So I dare not drop the shield. But I have to get rid of the shimmer. It's a giveaway.

"How do I look to you now?" he asked Maeneb once they were alone on the bench.

"What? Oh... the same as ever. Sorry, I forgot you were there."

"And you can't feel my mind?"

"I told you," she said, a touch impatiently. "No, I can't. But I can feel everybody else and it's driving me mad. That school is far too loud. I think I'm going home."

The school was all but silent now that the children were inside. Nevertheless he nodded, and watched Maeneb leave. She didn't turn to wave.

Leor began to feel a little better now that he didn't have to talk. After a while, as the nausea receded, he decided to continue walking through the city to see how people responded to him. Or, with any luck, failed to respond.

So he set off walking slowly, carefully, as if he were balancing on some invisible tightrope. As he re-entered the busier streets he found that most people moved aside for him, yet didn't seem to be aware that they were doing so. No-one met his eye; there was no muttered "sorry" or "excuse me"; no acknowledgment at all that he was there. It was an odd feeling. He had become, not invisible, just totally insignificant: less important than that one-eyed beggar there, rattling his cup. Ever the beggar didn't bother to rattle it at him.

He kept walking without really caring where he was going. Probably north, certainly into the less salubrious parts of Kelvha city. Although the streets through which he threaded grew gradually narrower and less well-kept, and the shops dingier and less prosperous, it did not matter to him. He had a feeling he could walk right through a band of robbers and be perfectly safe.

What a city, though! He had not been inside Kelvha City for many years before this visit – not since the old king had been alive – and he didn't remember it being as busy then as it was now. He felt almost dazzled by the shifting quantities of people all trying to scratch a living, in these crowded lanes overhung by lopsided houses: the sellers not just of food but, in the increasingly tiny stalls, of ribbons, hats, knives, bottles, staves, rags, scraps of paper, song-birds, buckets... Who could live by selling buckets? That boy, evidently, with his thin body and thinner clothes, calling out his wares in a thin, tired voice. No school for him.

Leor stood and watched, wondering about all these lives that he did not know and could never know. Centuries had brought him only limited wisdom, he reflected. The longer he lived, the less he understood. Perhaps he could never understand these poor vulnerable humans, afflicted by bodily ills that he was immune to. Or at least could not succumb to. For he was permanently different; perhaps even immortal. He did not know quite how that made him feel.

And then, as if the street had turned into a mirror, he saw himself.

Some twenty yards away. Tall and swiftly striding: passing a sad girl selling combs, turning to look at her tray of wares. There was no mistaking that it was himself – that long red hair, the two white streaks in it, the shaggy beard against the dark surcoat. Had his beard really grown that long?

What was this? Was it some dreadful dream? Had he managed to part his soul from his body and send it walking through the streets of Kelvha? In a huge wave of renewed nausea Leor saw the other self exchange a word with the comb-seller, pick out a comb, and toss a coin onto the ground so that she had to grovel for it.

That wasn't him. He would never do that. He had not stepped out of his own body. Someone was impersonating him.

And someone was proceeding through the streets, stopping here and there at various stalls to pick over the wares, attracting glances. Almost ostentatious in his fastidious inspection of the goods on sale. Is that what I look like? thought Leor through his sickness; so long, so lean, so finicky and careful?

So conspicuous. Unlike this other self, my true self, my unobtrusive self – I believe and hope – that is now sliding past the stalls and down the street unnoticed, in pursuit.

The duplicate Leor quickened his pace. Leor saw him leave the shopping area by a short passage between damp brick walls, and on the other side pause in the sunlight, standing with arms folded as he looked around.

Leor shuffled down the passage too. The old woman he brushed past did not appear to notice him.

But everyone noticed the other Leor. Now he was loudly asking directions to Old Tanneries Street, in deep and resonant Kelvhan, not unlike Leor's own voice; another dreb was tossed to the ground in the direction of a man who answered. The red hair moved like a flame atop a tall thin candle, as the second Leor strode down the middle of the street without regard for any oncomers. People walking the other way had to jump aside.

I would not do that either, thought Leor, his alarm merging with indignation. What must everybody think of me – of him? That rude, peremptory wizard...

...Who was now approaching a thin stone building held upright, it appeared, only by the wider wooden buildings on either side that seemed to prop it up. In its doorway stood a blue-robed man. He looked like some sort of priest. If this was Old Tanneries Street, thought Leor, it must be the Temple of Borgun.

The false Leor paused. Then he stepped back behind a pillar, out of the blue-robed man's line of sight; yet still easily within the vision of three elderly women who sat knitting and chatting on the nearby doorsteps. Leor too could see him clearly but the red head did not turn his way. He was fairly sure that his presence had not been registered. He was a nobody, a beggar, a dreb on the dusty ground, just another unremarkable denizen of this seething city.

The other Leor dropped his head. When he raised it again and shook it, the red mane with its white streaks seemed to shake itself away. It was completely gone, replaced by a close-cropped scalp. The garments still looked similar, but the shape within had changed: it was not so lanky now, but was strong and well-knit. A good body, thought Leor, until the face half-turned and he saw the scars.

The old women had stopped chatting. Their hands stilled on their knitting as they stared up at the transformed man in shock and fear. They seemed paralysed; but as soon as the duplicate Leor – now the duplicate Huldarion – walked away, they at once began to talk again in high-pitched quick alarm.

The false Huldarion walked over to the doorway where the man in blue robes stood. The robed man regarded him with calm surprise. Then he bowed low and invited him respectfully in through the door.

Like the old women, Leor too felt paralysed for an instant. What should he do? Should he follow and unshield himself, denounce the imposter? For it must surely be Adon.

But if it was Adon, he must not unshield himself. If Adon knew he was detected, the danger would be so much greater.

But the danger was great now. What was he doing in there? What did he want?

Standing in bewildered dismay, Leor noticed to his added bewilderment one of Veron's huntsman emerge from a nearby building to also stare, frowning, at the door through which the men had gone.

The huntsman turned to speak to the old women. He was trying to ask them what they had seen, but his Kelvhan was bad; they did not understand him. Leor hastened over.

"I'll tell you what's happened," he said in Standard. "But somewhere else."

The huntsman blinked at him as if he couldn't hear. He turned away, apparently unable to see Leor, and was beginning to address the women again when Leor yanked at his elbow.

"It's me! I'm Leor!" he insisted. "Take me to Veron."

"Veron?" That name got through to the huntsman, at least. He blinked again, uncertainly, before he turned and looked at the building he had emerged from: a wholesaler of packing-cases, casks and rope, according to the shabby sign outside.

Leor strode over to it and entered without knocking. Veron was inside. In fact Veron must have seen him coming, because he met him with an outstretched knife.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

Leor looked down at the knife pointing at his chest. "Put that thing down, Veron. It's me, Leor."

"Leor?" He sounded disbelieving.

"I'm shielded so that Adon cannot see or sense me. Because I think that it's Adon who just went into that thin stone building opposite."

"The temple of Borgun? I saw Leor go in there."

"No, that wasn't me, I'm here. We have to tell Huldarion. Adon's inside the temple pretending to be him. We need to warn him..." Leor was overcome by another surge of nausea and had to sit down on a box, trying not to be sick. "It's the shield," he said weakly. "Hard to get used to."

Veron screwed up his eyes, scrutinising him as if he were a stag hidden deep inside a thicket. Then he slowly nodded.

"Camouflage," he said. "I like it. Could you teach me that?"

## Chapter 23

"The boy called him the tiger-killer?" repeated Parthenal. "Well, Rothir, it seems you've got yourself a name already." He sounded amused, and perhaps even, Rothir thought, a touch aggrieved. Rothir sympathised with his sense of slight injustice. Parthenal's single combat should have been the highlight of the joust.

"It's a name I don't want," he answered, sitting on the wooden settle which was polished to inky darkness not by carefully applied beeswax but by decades of spillages and thousands of backsides. This inn of Leor's was a drab, unadorned place; but for that reason, Rothir considered that it was as good a meeting-place as any for the Riders to confer. Plenty of mouse-holes, but no spy-holes. No fine mosaics or even pictures on the wall for a spy-hole to lurk in. Groups of Riders were huddled under the low smoke-stained ceiling.

"Don't worry," said Yaret, sitting by him. "People's memories are short. Unless you manage to kill a firedrake in the next week they'll soon have forgotten all about the tiger."

"I wish I could forget about it myself," Rothir said soberly. "It's always there, lying on the sawdust, dying. Like an after-image of the sun inside my skull. A striped sun."

"You're still not quite yourself," Parthenal advised him. "Looking a bit dazed, I'd say."

"Or a shadow of the moon. Bars of white and black," said Yaret meditatively.

Rothir thought about it: that slow, heavy, rippling tide. "Black and silver. Yes. You're still aware of her?" He did not want to name the subject of his thoughts – not even merely as *the huntress* – in case she somehow reappeared. But with Yaret he did not need to spell it out.

"Much of the time," said Yaret, "to some degree or other," and she glanced over at Veron, who was talking vigorously to Huldarion on the far side of the parlour. Leor, Uld and Solon were with them: Leor looked unhappy, Uld attentive and Solon bored. But boredom was a facade for Solon just as impassivity was for Huldarion. Thoronal stood adrift of the others, staring down at the cold fireplace.

"I don't know what Veron is made of," said Yaret, "that he can withstand it."

"Leather and iron," said Delgeb.

"He's lived his life beneath the moon," said Parthenal, "hunting. Never mind that for now. Why is Huldarion so angry?" Rothir could not see any anger in his chieftain's face, but Parthenal continued, "What's been going on inside that temple of Borgun? I don't understand it properly."

"I don't understand it at all," said Rothir. Yaret had explained about some complex imposture of Leor – or was it of Huldarion? The details had slipped past him, between those bars of black and silver.

Yaret began to explain, again. "It seems that whoever entered the temple in the guise of Huldarion wanted the people of the city to think he was actually Leor."

There it was again. He still didn't follow.

"According to Leor the imposter looked exactly like him," Yaret went on. "Then he changed shape from Leor to Huldarion in front of three gossiping old ladies – who would have heard all about Huldarion's scars, and were duly amazed. So half the city will have heard about that magic transformation by now. Leor turning himself into Huldarion."

"They won't necessarily believe it," said Shebel.

"But we know it happened," countered Parthenal, "because we know who it really was."

"Adon," said Yaret, who seemed to feel none of the aversion to naming him that the Riders did.



Adon. His very name turns my stomach, thought Rothir; I am even less willing to name him than I am the huntress, although I have only knowingly seen him four times in my life, and always at a distance; in battle, or rather at the edges of it. Adon lets others do his fighting for him, even though he cannot die, supposedly. Any wound will heal itself. I could not even describe him now except to say that he looks young. Or rather, ageless: unlined, handsome, I suppose. A blank canvas of a face. I daresay he can draw on it whatever features he requires.

Yaret was still explaining. "According to Leor, Adon made sure that he was noticed as he walked through the city in Leor's shape. He made himself conspicuous. And he made sure that he was witnessed when he transformed into Huldarion."

"He is a despicable creature," said Parthenal with cold contempt. "To pretend to be Huldarion? A man worth a thousand of him? No, more, infinitely more, because he himself is worthless."

"Good at deceit, however. If the priest had not been forewarned, he might have accepted him as Huldarion," said Yaret. "But not for long. Word from outside would have quickly reached the temple. The priest would have soon learnt of the transformation. So Adon was hoping to deceive the priest into thinking he had been visited by Leor in disguise."

"Convolutéd," commented Tiburé, and Rothir silently agreed. So convolutéd that he still did not quite follow it. In fact, he was not sure what he was meant to be following.

"Did he say anything important to the priest while he was inside the temple?" Shebel asked.

Yaret shook her head. "Not according to Veron, who has been acting as our emissary to the priest. The man pretending to be Huldarion stayed only for a few moments. He knelt before the statues of Borgun, and spoke three sentences. Then he left by the main door. A little later the priest left by the back, and reported to Veron."

"And what were those three sentences?" asked Parthenal.

"Firstly, *I greet you in the name of all the Vonn.*"

"Ah," said Parthenal. "No wonder Huldarion looks so angry."

"And then when the priest spoke to him, the impostor stared at the statue and said, *Borgun should have a ruby on his forehead, a jewel made of blood.*"

"Very poetic," commented Delgeb. "And the third thing he said?"

"*Shall the statue come to life and rise up for the people?*"

"Whoa," said Delgeb. "Ominous."

"However," said Yaret, "he knew the priest would soon discover that he had not been talking to Huldarion at all."

"Then the purpose of the visit was... what?" asked Rothir, doubtful that he had actually understood this tale correctly.

"Simply to implicate Leor, it would seem."

"And to make Huldarion distrust Leor," added Delgeb.

"To sow discord and disharmony," said Parthenal. "He wants us fighting amongst ourselves." He stood with his head bowed, not in humility but as a necessity; for he almost touched the ceiling in this gloomy low-beamed parlour.

"But Adon was clumsy," said Yaret.

"He is not known for being clumsy," Tiburé said drily.

"Oh, I should think Adon is very clever," she replied, "and that he knows it. And that he imagines everyone else to be stupid in comparison. That's why he didn't expect Leor to be there. He assumed he would know if Leor was anywhere near him. But the whole business of transforming in front of the old ladies was clumsy. Theatrical."

"He likes theatre," said Tiburé thoughtfully.

"I daresay. I expect he likes to be looked at. But it sounds very ostentatious. And Adon was trying to be too clever. He made a mistake."

"He is not known for making mistakes either," said Parthenal. "What do you mean?"

Yaret shook her head. Huldarion was walking over to them with his group.

They all stood up. As he did the same, it occurred to Rothir that this was something new. Huldarion would not have wanted such a gesture before he came to Kelvha: nor did he ask for it now – yet it seemed to be required. Things were changing.

Although three years younger, Rothir had always loved Huldarion as a friend. But since he had displeased Huldarion by allowing the capture of the darkburn, the relationship had seemed more one of master and unworthy bondsman. No, liegeman; for he was bound to Huldarion by fidelity and not by any law. And he did not consider himself unworthy. Yet he did not know if he was fully back in favour. The tiger's death had helped, perhaps.

The silver bars again intruded on his thoughts... He tried to make his way between them and was aware of Yaret looking over at him with knit brows.

"What Yaret means is this," said Huldarion calmly. "When the priest spoke to the impostor, he asked him for a password which had come from me, a word known only to the Vonn. But I had named a false password within the castle walls, in the chart room where I knew there was a spyhole. *Ruby* was the false word. And that is the word that the impostor gave back to the priest."

Rothir nodded. To his relief, he understood that. "So he has spies within the castle."

"What password?" asked Thoronal, now speaking for the first time. "We have never had such a thing."

Huldarion looked at him gravely. "It was for this occasion only. But I will not say it here." That made Rothir wonder why not. Did Huldarion not trust even his own Riders? Did he not consider them all bound to him by equal fidelity? That troubled him, in case it was Rothir himself whom Huldarion did not trust.

"So that is the mistake you meant," said Parthenal to Yaret.

She shook her head again. "Not quite. Look: Adon was pretending to be Leor. But how could Leor know a password that was a secret known only to the Vonn?"

They all turned and looked at Leor.

"I have never known any such secret word," said the wizard, "and although I would be flattered to be entrusted with it, I would not expect it."

"There has never been any such secret word," Huldarion said, "until now."

"Maybe it is something that we should adopt," suggested Solon.

But Parthenal was ruminating on Adon. "The ignoble one might have thought that Leor could have guessed the word. The king's crown at Caervonn bears a single ruby – no other jewel."

"It's not a pretty thing," explained Huldarion to Yaret. "But it is of great significance, and fame, having been won in battle six hundred years ago."

Rothir was glad to see Huldarion addressing her with such consideration, as if he respected her judgement. My protégé, he thought. It was Veron who called her that. I don't know why. She is more a protégé of Veron's. One of the hunters now, like that man Zan.

"I see," said Yaret. "But it was still clumsy of Adon."

"I like to think of him as being clumsy," Delgeb said.

"However, his clumsiness is not something that we can rely on," said Huldarion. "The next question is: who is the spy? Who listened to our conversation – or set a listener at the spyhole – and then gave the secret password to Adon?"

"My money's on Nerogun," said Veron.

Rothir immediately felt that he did not agree, yet he could not pin-point why. He tried to gather his wits together sufficiently to work it out, because he needed to show that he understood all this; although its tangled strangeness seemed to have tied knots in his thoughts.

"I don't see Nerogun playing second fiddle to anyone," he objected. "Because... because, what would he have to gain by that sort of treachery? He already has all the power that he needs. He's at the top of his tree. Doesn't need to be beholden to anyone. Wouldn't want to be."

"Perhaps not," said Huldarion. "Who else, then?"

"That little nervous man," said Thoronal, "who knew where all the spyholes were. The archivist."

"I doubt that," said Parthenal irritably, for once letting his dislike of his cousin show. "Tamu is harmless."

"He may appear harmless. But he doesn't seem to like the rulers of the castle."

"He likes *us*," said Parthenal.

"Tamu may know where the spyholes are, but he's unlikely to be the person monitoring them," said Uld. "Who could have been listening to you talk inside the chart room? That's our man – or anyone whom he reports to."

"What about the Keeper of the Keys?" asked Shebel.

"Melegan? He's too indolent to be a spy," said Tiburé with certainty.

"That soldier Jeveran," said Solon.

Huldarion frowned. Clearly he did not like the suggestion. Yet Rothir felt it was more likely than Tamu, because Jeveran had influence and confidence where Tamu had neither.

He thought, with a vague lurch of uneasiness, that he would never before have considered that Huldarion was a man to dismiss an idea simply because it was unwelcome. Something had changed. What had changed? Maybe merely himself... he felt another slow surge of black and silver bars, and tried to focus on the names.

"Perhaps Shargun is the traitor," added Uld.

At that Huldarion nodded slowly, as if that idea were more welcome. "Possibly; although, like Nerogun, Shargun already wields sufficient power. A traitor is, perhaps, more likely to be someone a little lower down the ranks, somebody who wants to rise. Do you remember the man in the armoury, the day we came here?"

"The assistant to the Keeper of the Swords?" said Thoronal. "That insolent man?"

"Iajo," said Huldarion. "For some reason he springs to my mind." He sighed. "But there is no point in guessing. We shall just have to assume that everyone inside Kelvha Castle is potentially a traitor. Even if it's only one man."

"Or woman," added Rothir.

Huldarion's eyes narrowed slightly. Yet Rothir considered it to be a fair point. If Huldarion was to marry Meya he needed to be aware of the possibility that she might not be all she seemed.

For nothing in this place is what it seems, he thought. Everything is stripes and shadows. Huldarion has to keep his eyes open. And with an instant of clear apprehension he felt that Huldarion must not allow himself to be blinded by his desires, even as he drew closer to fulfilling them.

"Or woman, indeed," Huldarion answered levelly. "And now I need to go back to the castle. Another dinner awaits, with too much wine and pastry, and the High Prince's company."

"Which is not scintillating," said Parthenal. "Do I have to come?"

"No, you need not attend," Huldarion replied. "I expect Sashel will not turn it down."

"Life in the castle seems to suit Sashel."

Huldarion seemed to consider this before answering, "He likes some aspects of it, I believe."

"Good. I admit I don't," said Parthenal. "I mean the ceremony, the hierarchy, the way they speak to their servants."

Huldarion put a hand briefly on his shoulder. "I know that. I don't care for it either. And I know that many of the Riders are frustrated by having to linger here, their skills unused."

"All that pastry, and nothing to do," said Rothir.

"Speak for yourself," said Veron. "How long before we ride out to battle with the stonemen?"

"A fortnight at the soonest," Huldarion answered. "The scouts left yesterday – the second group. The ones I sent out earlier are returning now in ones and twos. Crade arrived this morning."

"Do the Kelvhans know that? Where d'you meet him?" Veron demanded.

"I have a place," said Huldarion. He nodded to them and departed with Thoronal, Uld and Solon in his train. A king with his retinue, thought Rothir, of which I seem to be no longer part. They all had to duck as they went out through the crooked doorway.

## Chapter 24

"A place? What place?" asked Veron, addressing the empty air. "It must be in the castle or I'd know about it."

Parthenal shook his bowed head. He felt himself trammelled not only by the lowness of the ceiling but by the lowness of the story he had just listened to. By the falsehoods of Adon.

He didn't care about the imposture of Leor. But for such a creature to pretend to be Huldarion was unforgivable; a kind of blasphemy.

His skin still tingled where Huldarion had laid a hand upon his shoulder. For others it is the huntress, he thought in a moment of mute anguish. For me it is Huldarion. His after-image is always there, imprinted on my mind, upon my body, on my soul. I do not want to be rid of it but I could not even if I tried.

"Your spies cannot be everywhere," said Yaret to Veron, with a wary smile.

"But somebody's will be," said Veron. "I hope he's careful."

"Huldarion is always careful," murmured Parthenal.

"Careful about what? I'm not following all this," said Rothir.

Veron studied him. "Still not quite back to normal, are you?" he remarked. "Sit down and let me look at you." He pushed Rothir gently but firmly onto the polished settle and moved his hand to and fro before his face.

"Is it concussion?" asked Yaret.

Veron made a sudden movement towards Rothir with his fist. It was a swift stroke: but Rothir's hand moved faster, and had gripped the hunter's arm before the fist could reach him. Veron laughed.

"Nothing wrong with your reactions," he said. "Good. We're going to need 'em."

"But his brain is still confused," said Yaret, with obvious concern.

"That'll pass." Veron ruffled Rothir's hair as if he were a schoolboy: an unusually affectionate gesture for the hunter to make, and something that no-one except Parthenal would normally dare to do to Rothir. And then only when his friend was in a particularly good mood.

But no, he was wrong: for as Veron turned aside, Yaret put her hand to Rothir's head, very lightly, to smooth down his ruffled hair, and he did not pull away.

"Try not to worry about it," she suggested.

"I can't help it," said Rothir.

"He's a worrier by nature," put in Parthenal.

"Not exactly," said Rothir. "Things just weigh on me."

This was something Parthenal had never understood. "Then you need to learn to put things down."

"That is easier said than done," said Leor, who was standing by the hearth. He held out his hands to the cold fireplace and sighed before withdrawing them again. The last glow of the embers had long faded and there was no more firewood. We need a darkburn, thought Parthenal, before castigating himself for the idea.

"Not the most comfortable of places you have here," he commented to Leor.

"It serves," said Leor a touch gloomily.

"The publican doesn't know who you are?"

"Of course not. He doesn't know who you are either," said Leor. "I used a little charm as you came in. He thinks that you're a bunch of horse traders."

"All of us?" said Shebel, the only woman dressed in a gown rather than dun breeches.

"Not you," said Leor. "You're a hanger-on of dubious morals."

"Well, thank you."

"And that's just a little charm?" enquired Yaret.

Leor spread his hands before wrapping them in his sleeves. "It's insignificant."

"I would have thought any charm is significant to those it's used on," Yaret replied, with some indignation. Parthenal could not tell if it was assumed or not. "How about asking our permission first?"

Leor looked taken aback. "Well, how about not abandoning me on a park bench when I'm feeling weak and sick?" he countered.

"I left you with Maeneb," she said.

"Exactly. And Maeneb abandoned me as well, a minute afterwards, as you could easily have predicted. Did you and Durba find what you were looking for?"

Now it was Yaret's turn to look taken aback. "What were we looking for?" she said cautiously.

"Strings for your lutine."

"Oh! I found some of those. So are you feeling all right now?"

"Yes and no," said Leor. He gazed at Yaret with plaintive eyes, Parthenal thought, as if hoping she might lay her hand upon his hair next. But she did nothing of the sort.

"Good," she said briskly. "Because I have to abandon you again. Prior appointment: dinner." She saluted them in the archer's fashion, and departed.

"Dinner? Who with?" said Rothir. "That fellow Zan?"

"Not him. She's up to something," said Veron.

"Everybody's up to something," said Leor, and he sighed the heavy sigh of an invalid wanting sympathy. When no-one offered any, he said, "Well, I'm up to my bed." Shambling out of the parlour, he failed to duck in the doorway and they heard his pained exclamations rumbling up the stairs.

"I didn't quite follow some of that. Who abandoned who?" said Rothir.

Veron scrutinized him. "You really aren't entirely with us, are you?"

"I think I'm here," said Rothir. "I'm just not sure what's going on."

"Well, that's Kelvha for you," said Parthenal with a shrug. "Come on, Rothir, let's find somewhere in the city that will serve a decent meal. I can guarantee we won't get one in this tavern. Will anybody join us? Delgeb? Shebel?"

"Glad to." Both women picked up their cloaks.

"Veron?"

The hunter shook his head. "No, I'm waiting here for somebody."

Rothir stood up but got no further. Parthenal had to steer him out into the lobby. Food, that was what Rothir needed.

Before they could leave the tavern, the outer door burst open before them, and a strange man walked into the hall. A young man, Kelvhan; with a pleasant enough face, but a deformed ear.

"Is Veron around?" he asked.

"I know you," said Rothir, stopping to stare at him. "Don't I?"

"Through here," said Veron, appearing from the parlour.

"I've got them," said the man to him. Veron merely nodded, ushering him in.

"You're the smith," said Rothir to the man's back: too late, for the pair had already disappeared. He turned to the others. "That was the arrowhead man. Martun. They were good arrowheads. She liked them."

"She?" asked Delgeb.

Rothir frowned. He put a hand to his head, feeling for the latest scar. "The huntress," he said. "Is she still in the air?"

"Not here," said Parthenal. Although he felt almost as confused as his friend by now, he had no intention of admitting it. "You need to eat," he added, patting Rothir's arm. "Come on, this way. Sashel recommended a little place underneath the west wall of the castle."

The four of them left the gloom of the tavern to walk through lamplit streets. They passed numerous food stalls, but few beggars: for soon they entered the wealthy side of Kelvha City. Any pedestrians wandering the streets around them here were clad in brightly decorated, fur-trimmed cloaks – quite different to the hunters' furs, and much less functional, thought Parthenal. He nodded to one or two noblemen who looked vaguely familiar, congratulating himself on having had the foresight to ask the women along. At this rate he might acquire a reputation as a ladies' man amongst the Kelvhans.

"Sashel's making the most of his stay inside the castle," commented Delgeb as they walked the well-swept pavements. "He seems quite taken with it. Talks about it a lot, anyway."

"He's enjoying the lap of luxury," said Shebel.

"He certainly likes the tournaments and the hunting. He and Aretor get on well with the Prince," said Parthenal. "Shared interests."

"And you don't?" asked Shebel.

He shrugged. "Faldron's a bit immature. Not much go in him."

"But Faldron had plenty of go up north," said Rothir, looking puzzled. "Too much, if anything. Didn't he?"

"He did. Perhaps he didn't drink so much up there," said Parthenal drily. "He likes his wine, for sure."

"Ssh," said Shebel. "Better not talk about Prince Faldron here. Certainly not once we're inside the eatery. Is this the place? I hope it's not all pastry."

The eating-house was a drab, quiet establishment wedged against the castle wall; on its other side a much larger hostelry appeared to want to squeeze it out of existence.

"It doesn't look much," said Delgeb, who preferred flashier places.

"No, but apparently the food is good," said Parthenal. "Lots of the senior castle officials eat here. Not the high lords, though. Not fashionable enough for them. Will it do for you?"

Delgeb sighed. "I suppose so."

They entered the badly lit building – again he had to duck to avoid the lintel – and sat down at a table to study the menu chalked up on the wall. There was a great deal of pastry, which seemed to be universal in Kelvha for both rich and poor alike. But no equality there, thought Parthenal: it's plain stodge for the poor, and delicate layers of artistry and spices for the wealthy.

This place seemed to be somewhere in between. He had just ordered the venison pasty when he noticed the couple at the table in the far corner, where the lamplight barely extended.

"Hallo," he said, "that's Yaret. So this is where her appointment was."

"Who's she with?" Rothir craned his head. "That's the... what's-his-name. In the library."

"Tamu," said Parthenal, and laughed. He was not sure why. The archivist had to eat somewhere, after all. He found that he felt quite protective of the little man who had warned him against Jaul. Since that evening he had treated Jaul with lofty coolness, although admittedly he had almost forgotten about Tamu until Thoronal had spoken so unfavourably of him earlier that evening.

"Is he someone you know? Should we go over and say hallo?" asked Shebel.

"No, no. We'll terrify him. He doesn't look too comfortable as it is," Parthenal observed. "I wonder what business Yaret has with him? I think Veron's right – she's up to something."

Yaret was in earnest conversation with Tamu. During his swift curious glances in their direction Parthenal saw the archivist unroll a small sheaf of papers on the table. The two scanned them together, Yaret taking notes on her own scrap of paper.

So it was certainly business, not a social meal. Parthenal wondered if Tamu ever partook of a purely social meal. He looked like a man used to dining on his own, tucked unobtrusively in his dark corner.

But even in this gloomy place he and Yaret could hardly fail to notice the group of Riders. When Yaret did see them, she gave a casual wave. Tamu, as he had predicted, looked, if not exactly terrified, at least alarmed. Parthenal smiled kindly at him and then attended to his pasty. He wondered if Tamu knew that Yaret was a woman; and which would scare him more, male or female company?

They had almost finished eating – Delgeb and Shebel talkative, and Rothir grave and silent – when Yaret stood up and pushed back her stool. After bowing to Tamu she came over to their table, holding the remnants of her pie. Egg from the look of it. She took a bite and said,

"Tamu sends you his regards. Even the tiger-killer."

"Don't," said Rothir, wincing.

"Sorry. He didn't actually call you that, not in so many words anyway."

"You had a lot of other words together," Delgeb remarked.

"Yes. I saw Tamu in here the other evening, when I came in with Sashel; he pointed Tamu out and introduced us. So I thought I'd ask for his expertise on a couple of matters," said Yaret.

"Huldarion has already asked him about darkburns. What other matters do you think that he might know about?" enquired Parthenal.

"For one, if there is anything in his records about Athelid and its components. It would be useful to know exactly what the stonemen dose themselves with."

"I gave a sample to the herb-mistress in the castle, to see if she can analyse it," explained Shebel to the others round the table, "but she didn't seem too confident. She said it would be difficult."

"So I thought there was no harm in asking Tamu too – just in case he has any medical documents in his library."

"And has he?"

"Some," said Yaret. "Those scrolls he showed me: they didn't mean much to me, because I use different names for herbs, but I copied down a few things. Here you are, Shebel." She handed Shebel her scrap of paper.

"How could knowing about Athelid be useful?" asked Rothir.

"Knowledge is always useful," said Shebel.

"There might be an antidote to Athelid," added Delgeb. "To stop it working. That would send the stonemen mad." She spoke with a certain amount of glee.

"That's not what I had in mind at all!" objected Yaret.

Delgeb shrugged. "It would be useful, though. So what was the other matter you discussed with him?"

"Ah, well, that's just a private interest. Folk-lore, really," said Yaret lightly. "I wondered if his records held anything about lins. They call them bunnos here, apparently."

"Not so useful," Delgeb commented. "Poor little man. He's just knocked over his water in his effort not to look at us."



Parthenal glanced over and saw Tamu desperately mopping the table with a napkin. "Did you tell him you're a female?" he asked Yaret.

"Of course I did."

"Ah, no wonder he's looking so abashed. You've probably filled his head with unspoken longings," he commented.

"I doubt that." She studied Rothir. "How are you feeling now you've eaten?" she asked him.

"Full," said Rothir.

"Still dazed?"

"I don't know." Though his friend still looked dazed, in Parthenal's opinion. Or bemused, at least.

"Hmm." Yaret raised an eyebrow, and put out one hand as if she wanted to do a little more hair-ruffling. But instead she raised it to her forehead in salute, and then limped out.

"Sashel? What was she doing here with Sashel?" said Rothir.

"Eating pie?" suggested Delgeb.

He looked confused. "Did I just say that aloud?"

"You did."

"I really have no idea at all what's going on," said Rothir, staring at his plate.

"Finish your dinner," Parthenal advised him. He took his own last mouthful, and glanced over again at Tamu, in pity mingled with amusement. Tamu did not know what to do with his soggy napkin and was trying unsuccessfully to gain the waiter's attention without making any noise. Poor little man, indeed.

## Chapter 25

Huldarion sat at the banqueting table and toyed with the heavy goblet in his hand. While he made what passed for conversation with the Lady Belfura – difficult, since she responded with nothing but a somewhat stony “Oh, indeed,” to any of his observations – he was watching High Prince Faldron as unobtrusively as he could.

It had already struck him that the young prince, while not exactly empty-headed, seemed much more suggestible here in Kelvha Castle than he had been on the distant northern battlefield; and never more so than after a glass or two of wine. But only at their meeting in the chart room had it become clear to Huldarion that Faldron had his own wine-flagon. He had wondered if this was to avoid any possibility of the wine being tampered with. It seemed unlikely, when Nerogun and the other lords drank freely from the common flagons.

At this banquet he paid more attention when the wine was poured. Faldron’s wine was brought over to the table separately to the rest, carried by a haughty serving-man. Seeing that the arrangement was obviously no secret, Huldarion made some polite comment on it across the table to the Prince.

Nerogun, on his left side, answered for him.

“It’s a Southern Weldish vintage,” the Post-Regent said indulgently. “A young man’s wine, eh, Faldron? Uncommon. Not to my taste, I must admit. But you prefer it.”

“Oh, I do,” said Faldron. “You must try some, Huldarion.” He motioned to his servant who carried the flagon forward and half-filled Huldarion’s goblet.

Huldarion preferred not to drink more than he could help at any of these occasions, because he wanted his wits about him, even at an informal banquet such as this. Normally he would take frequent small sips, so tiny as to barely wet his mouth. Now he picked the goblet up unwillingly. It was an object of great craft, the glass containing cloudy swirls of colour, and bearing gilt adornments on its outer surface. While an attractive vessel it was not conducive to studying the appearance of the wine.

“Southern Weldish, you say?”

“It has a peppery flavour that is much valued,” said Nerogun.

Huldarion raised it to his lips politely and pretended to drink whilst taking the merest drop. “Your good health, your Highness. Indeed, a very pleasant vintage. Peppery, as you say. I do not blame you for your preference.” He put the wine down with little idea of what it tasted like. He felt on edge; and not just because of the wine.

This was Kelvha’s idea of an informal occasion. As well as the high lords, several wives were present: Shildha, Tiburé’s hostess, was a little further down the table, giggling a great deal. The Vizier’s ancient wife sat stern-faced, looking somewhat sharper than her husband. Other rigid-faced old ladies were interspersed with younger, prettier ones.

But the women were there only to listen and exclaim and look decorative, while the men held centre stage. It made Huldarion uncomfortable. He was used to talking to women on more equal terms. Moreover, he was aware that all eyes were on him – whether obviously or not; and felt the wearying necessity of talking with suitable interest on every subject.

He would have liked to have exchanged some less guarded comments with Meya, who was sitting on the far side of the table, some way down. But he would have had to shout. Instead, he was obliged to be polite to the young ladies closer by: a tricky task, since they were three of his rejects. Of those three he was fairly sure that two had not forgiven him.

Belfura had treated him to a single acid smile – no simpering now – while Gaelera barely acknowledged his presence at all. He noticed her father frowning at her. But when Gaelera glanced up at Nerogun he withdrew his gaze.

However, on the Riders' entering the hall the High Princess Idria had greeted them with genuine warmth. So she bore no grudge. Idria was now sitting opposite his two youngest Riders, Aretor and Sashel, talking to them with a pleasant if naïve enthusiasm. Unlike the other ladies, then, she was allowed to talk; and was evidently not as shrinking as Huldarion had thought her. Certainly more lively than her listless brother Faldron, when in the right company.

Faldron attends too many banquets, thought Huldarion. Too much of that Weldish wine. He watched Faldron drink. Meanwhile Nerogun was discussing taxes – or, rather, holding forth about rates of taxation. Huldarion nodded and pretended to agree with everything he said.

As if I were one of the womenfolk, he thought. How exhausting it must be to be permitted no opinion.

Opposite them Thoronal sat with lips compressed. He did not approve even of the small deceit of pretending to agree with Nerogun.

"You think we should charge eight drebs per hundred? What is eight per hundred of fifty thousand?" said Faldron. He counted on his fingers before looking up with a disarming smile. "I make it eight hundred." Huldarion resisted the urge to correct him.

"Ah. Arithmetic," said Nerogun, "best left to clerks, eh, Faldron?"

"Definitely," said Faldron.

"The Prince prefers lordly pursuits to humdrum matters of administration," said Nerogun. "Much more suitable."

"For one of my standing," agreed the prince, taking another gulp of wine.

"Of course a prince must take some interest in state affairs," said Huldarion.

"Of course," said Faldron. "I always do." He repeated whatever was said to him, without discrimination. Even though Huldarion had just been doing the same thing, he found it unnerving.

"Ah!" said Faldron, as if he had just remembered something. "My Lord Huldarion, you must have some more of my vintage. You liked it, didn't you? Nerogun thought you would."

Huldarion thought he detected a twitch of annoyance on Nerogun's face. That twitch alarmed him. He took care to appear casual as the man-servant reached forward to top up his goblet.

What could be in the wine? Poison he ruled out. Faldron took this wine nightly and was clearly in good health. But none the less Huldarion was suspicious that there was some extra component in it: something that blurred the Prince's wits and made him more than normally compliant.

He glanced at the goblet set before him, unwilling to drink. Yet it would be insulting to leave it there untasted. So, as before, he pretended to sip, and smiled, and talked about horses with the Prince, all the time wondering how he could avoid draining his goblet. He was now sure that Nerogun was watching him from the corner of his eye.

I cannot even pretend to spill it in this company, he thought. I need some distraction to happen, to have any chance.

He looked at his own men; but Thoronal was staring at the table, Uld was talking gently to the Vizier, and Sashel was making the princess Idria smile. Although that gave Huldarion a second's unease, it was not something he could think about just now.

Would Meya understand what was in his thoughts? Would she know anything about the wine? Although he was aware that her face was turned towards him he dared not signal to her with the Post-Regent looking on. He played with the stem of the goblet and exchanged inanities with Faldron. Then he pretended to take another sip. But soon Faldron would comment on the fact that the goblet was still full. And then Nerogun would know of his suspicions.

The Vizier made some mumbled remark: and for one second Nerogun turned his head away in order to reply. In that second Huldarion looked across at Meya, down at his goblet, and back at her face. That was all he dared to do. Even if Nerogun was not watching him, Gaelera might be. Such a vague gesture was probably not enough. It would mean nothing to Meya.

And Meya did not seem to take the hint. She would not know it was a hint. A moment later she rose quietly from the table and departed from the room, but so discreetly that it created none of the distraction that he needed.

He took a third minute sip of wine. Nerogun was now openly watching him, counting sips, no doubt. So to avoid drinking he talked on, aware that he was talking rubbish. Meya glided back in and walked towards her place. She did not even look at Huldarion and he was quite unprepared when with a shriek and a thud she went flying across the floor.

But he was not so unprepared that he could not act. As Faldron and Nerogun – and several others – jumped up from their seats, Huldarion stood up too, the goblet in his hand emptying itself underneath the table. Nobody was watching him just then, not even Gaelera.

He put the empty goblet down and hurried around the table to Meya's assistance. Although most of the shocked lords and ladies were on their feet, staring, the Vizier's wife was the only other person to have gone to Meya's aid. Nerogun was doing nothing to help her but appeared to be enjoying the sight of her bared calves as she sprawled inelegantly on the floor.

"My dear," said Huldarion as he took Meya's arm and helped her to stand up. She looked so shaken that he was not quite sure if the fall had been intended. "My dear, are you all right?"

Meya readjusted her skirts and frowned at the floor.

"Grease," she said. She sounded shaken too. "The floor is greasy."

"But no harm is done." As she glanced up at Huldarion his back was to the company. Discreetly he mouthed, *Thank you*.

She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. "No harm done, sir, as you say." He escorted her to her seat and then returned to his own.

"Some servant needs a beating for that," said Nerogun casually. "You can't have been supervising them as thoroughly as you usually do, my lady. Too many other things on your mind, eh?" Although his tone was jocular, Huldarion at that moment loathed him.

"Never fear," said Meya coolly. "I shall find the servant responsible." She did not look at Huldarion.

"They never own up to their carelessness," said the Vizier's wife.

"Indeed, why would they?" said Gaelera. Although she gazed around as if waiting for an answer, nobody offered her one.

"More wine, Huldarion?" said Faldron.

He held up his hand. "Excellent though it is, your Highness, I think I've had enough. I don't want to go the same way as Lady Meya!"

Faldron laughed, and now Huldarion despised himself as much as he had Nerogun a moment earlier. More. Because Meya had sacrificed her dignity at his bidding, and here he was laughing at her.

No doubt all the lords and ladies were as well, behind their politely smiling faces. But then the sweetmeats arrived – beautiful airy shells of pastry that encased exotic fruits – and in the lull while people turned their minds to food, their attention was at last withdrawn and he was freed of the laborious necessity to talk.

If the stars favoured him there would not be many more of these banquets to endure. He longed to be riding out of Kelvha. That matter of the temple of Borgun bothered him: another reason why he wanted to be gone, as soon as feasible. It would be harder for Adon to make his mischief in the wild. In Kelvha there were endless complications.

And now there was another possible complication close to hand. The Princess Idria was paying too much attention to Sashel. She was probably not aware of how often her eyes rested on the young Rider's face, or of how admiring they were; and Sashel's courtesy could not be faulted. But Huldarion knew he was unlikely to be the only one who noticed, and it was a worry.

At last the banquet ended. Still he had to linger, exchanging pleasantries and good-nights with the nobles, while Meya was the only one he wished to speak to. When Gaelera came up to him, the Lady Shildha, with whom he had been talking, looked alarmed and moved away; as did everyone else. They were left in a vacancy.

She is like a shark in the sea, thought Huldarion, that becomes suddenly empty of all the lesser fish. But surely Gaelera is no shark: that is her father. Presumably he has all the teeth she needs.

"I did not observe that the floor was greasy," Gaelera said to him composedly.

"Perhaps the Lady Meya's shoes were," said Huldarion. He wondered what Gaelera had seen. Nothing, surely? Now she stood with her head a little on one side, as if considering.

"Perhaps," she said. "Kelvha's well-being is paramount to me, you understand."

"Of course." Where was this leading?

"My father is a very able man."

"I have the highest respect for his abilities."

She nodded. "You were wise."

"Wise...?"

"In what you did," said Gaelera, still perfectly without expression.

Did she mean the overturned goblet? But he did not think that she had not seen that. What else could she be referring to? His choice of wife? Before he could attempt a reply she turned and walked away, as stately and as careful of her dress as ever.

Huldarion stared after her, his composure gone for once. To conceal his momentary bewilderment he beckoned to one of the serving-men, asking for Lady Meya's cloak to be brought to him.

But he could see Nerogun looking over at him uneasily. And when Nerogun strode across the room and said, "You are honoured. My daughter does not often talk to strangers," he heard unmistakeable tension in the Post-Regent's voice. That was interesting.

"Your daughter has impeccable manners," said Huldarion. "She is very good to afford me such notice; and very complimentary about you."

Nothing in that to disturb the Post-Regent. Yet the man said nothing, merely smiled with his lips only, before turning and clapping for the tables to be cleared, bellowing at a tardy footman as if to release some pent-up agitation.

At last Huldarion had the opportunity to go up to Meya, who had been waiting silently by her place.

"My dear," he said as he approached, "I trust you are unhurt?"

That was a cold look she gave him. "I am perfectly unhurt, I thank you," she replied.

"I have your cloak here. Would you care to take a turn in the garden with me? I should like some evening air."

She inclined her head and accompanied him down the long stone passage towards the garden. Behind them trailed her maid and two tall footmen. Perhaps she had only waited for him for the appearance of politeness, for she neither looked at him nor spoke until they were walking around the garden paths in the cooling dusk.

Alongside him, the bushes were dark shadows studded with faintly luminous blooms. The fragrance was much more noticeable than by day. He thought of Meya in his bed, and wondered if he could embrace her here.

No. Absolutely not. There was no privacy. Even though the servants had kept a respectful distance, other lords and ladies paraded between the roses. However, there was space enough for him to speak.

"I thank you for your help back then," he murmured.

"I gathered that you did not wish to drink the wine," said Meya flatly, her voice equally low. "Why not? Surely you did not think it had been tampered with?" She was displeased.

"It was Faldron's wine," he said, and paused to bow and smile at a pair of elder ladies as they walked past. "I think it may possibly have been tampered with, but not at the table."

"Where, then?" Still cold. She looked not at him, but straight ahead.

"At some point before it was served to Faldron. He drinks only his own wine. And I have noticed that he becomes unusually passive after drinking. He agrees with everything that is said. But he was not so up north on the battlefield."

She was silent for a moment. "Wine affects different people in different ways."

"Yes. But such passivity is not a normal side-effect."

"You think the wine may make him more controllable," she said.

"I do."

"But others would have noticed, even if I did not. Admittedly I do not often speak to him on these occasions, or indeed any other."

"Then who does? Who dines with the Prince regularly? Apart from Nerogun and Shargun?"

"The Vizier," she began, and paused. "Well. I see what you mean. Other high lords at various times... But they would not speak to the Prince at table unless he addressed them. Your presence allows for a greater degree of freedom than is usual."

He paused by one of the luminous blossoms. "Meya, smell this rose," he said. "How beautiful it is, how sweet."

She bent to sniff the rose, and smiled, briefly. "Yes. Sweet, indeed. I will investigate the matter of the wine."

"Discreetly," he suggested.

"Naturally."

"Meanwhile, please forgive me. I did not wish you to up-end yourself. However, as a distraction it was most effective."

"It was, wasn't it?" she said, the smile gone. "And more realistic than I intended. So I am now a laughing stock."

“Not to me,” he said, and took her hand to raise it to his lips. He wanted to draw some comparison between her and the rose, to say how sweet she was to him, how alluring: but he could not frame the words in time, and in any case she would not believe it.

“I have no idea what I am to you,” she said, very quietly. She withdrew her hand, curtsied to him, and swept herself away.

## Chapter 26

A day later, she was still annoyed with him, although she knew it was unfair. She could have chosen to ignore that look of appeal across the banquet table. And it was entirely her own fault that she had overdone the slip and tumble. The next morning, the bruises were coming up, blue and tender: Meya winced as she crossed the east courtyard on her way to the servants' hall.

It is my pride that is hurt more than my limbs, she thought. But I don't really understand why I did it at all. It is not as if I am beholden to Huldarion, not yet: I am faithful to Kelvha.

And this theory of Huldarion's is truly shocking. Somebody poisoning the Prince through wine? It would have to be a very slow poison... Or an ingredient that is not toxic, yet acts on the Prince's will? No, the whole idea is unthinkable. Perhaps I can prove it wrong.

As Meya marched into the servants' hall, her annoyance abated a little on seeing the flustered curtsies and deferential bows. None of the servants would have laughed at her tumble: they would have been too anxious not to be blamed for any spillage on the floor.

But of course none of them had been at fault. The floor had in fact been spotless. I have trained them well, thought Meya, as she requested to see Greshal, the chief steward. He was the quiet, efficient man whom she had made sure was appointed as head of the servants' hall several years ago.

An errand-boy hurried away, and soon brought Greshal to her – even the servants having servants inside Kelvha, an arrangement which it occurred to her might seem doubly strange to those Riders of the Vonn, who apparently had no servants at all. Or not bonded ones, at least. Surely there must be servants in Caervonn? A city could not thrive without them. It could not function.

Hence she valued the castle's servants although certain lords did not. She knew Greshal to be discreet: and after leading the way into the second pantry, where there were no spyholes, she asked him about Prince Faldron's special vintage and the man who served it.

"He's called Kavaul," said Greshal readily enough. "Weldish wine is rare in quantity but nothing special in itself, although Kavaul behaves as if it is. And he acts as if he's special too. The prince has any number of equerries of much higher rank. But Kavaul seems to think he's the most important man in the servants' hall. Of course, he is a westerner." This obviously implied untrustworthiness in Greshal's eyes; he was himself a southerner.

"Why did you employ him?" Meya asked.

"He came through The Lord Nerogun's recommendation. I cannot be rid of him unless the Lord Post-Regent commands it."

"I see. And could the Prince's rare and not-so-special wine be tampered with in any way? I do not accuse you, Greshal, you understand."

Greshal did not seem to take it amiss. "It arrives here in small casks, which would be hard to tamper with unnoticed. They are kept with the others in the cellars, and both I and the butlers keep a strict watch on everything in there, my lady."

"I am sure you do."

"So if anything is added to the wine, it must be in the flagon, by Kavaul." And then he paused before he added, "I admit, my lady, I am glad you came to find me. I have had certain suspicions about Kavaul and did not know what to do about them."

She nodded. Greshal could not have mentioned this to either Nerogun or the Keeper of the Keys without fear of retribution.

"Where are Kavaul's quarters?"



"I'll show you. But first, let me send him on an errand; I'll make sure he is out of the castle for a while."

"What sort of errand?"

"I have a contact – another steward of a great house. He has a collection of fine spices. They can be borrowed at need."

Meya nodded, again. Greshal had his own network, she was well aware: his own discreet sources of information, and means of getting messages in and out of the castle unnoticed. She knew better than to ask him which great house he meant.

Greshal disappeared. Alone in the dark storeroom, Meya reflected that she still needed to do something about getting the troublesome footman Lorolo removed. And that pregnant girl in the kitchen... Greshal's sources might be able to assist with both of those. However, one thing at a time.

When the steward returned he was carrying a heavy bunch of keys. He led her across the hall, up the servants' narrow spiral stairs and along the corridors of stone that burrowed like huge worm-holes through the heavy walls. This area was not somewhere that she normally had any reason to explore; and the few servants that they came across quickly slipped away. There was nobody about when Greshal finally unlocked a door and let her in.

She looked around the chamber with distaste. Like many of the servants' quarters, it was windowless; the small room smelt of sweat, and when Greshal lit the lamp she saw that dirty clothes had been left piled on the floor. But evidently Kavaul had it to himself: for there was only one bed, on which more clothes and shoes were thrown.

And on a shelf next to a tangle of grubby hose were three stoppered flasks. Meya eyed them with distaste before gingerly picking up the nearest flask to sniff at the contents.

"Brandy," she said dismissively, and replacing it, she tried the second container before recoiling. "Dear stars. What is *that*?" She offered it to Greshal, who sniffed tentatively and then grimaced.

"Ollish water," he said. "Kavaul wears it on his nights out. Supposed to be irresistible to ladies."

"He must know some strange ladies," murmured Meya.

"Indeed, Ma'am."

She took the third and smallest flask down from the shelf. Unstoppering it, she sniffed it cautiously. No scent was discernible. She swirled it in the flask. It was a thin liquid, looking much like water, although it seemed to cling to the flask's sides a little more than water would.

Pouring a few drops out into her palm, she sniffed again; and then she touched her finger to it and put it to her mouth. If it had caused no obvious illness in Faldron, a single droplet was unlikely to harm her. Indeed the whole idea was ridiculous... but not entirely so.

Colourless, odourless, almost tasteless. Yet not quite. There was a faint, sour oiliness to it.

"I don't think that is water," she remarked. "Can you find me a clean, empty bottle, Greshal? And a jug of clean water, if you please?"

Greshal nodded, departed and returned a couple of minutes later with both. The bottle was a plain grey stoneware one, a common bottle. Into this she emptied three-quarters of the contents of Kavaul's flask. She topped the flask up with the water, tasted it again, and nodded. It still had sufficient of the acrid taint for the substitution not to be immediately obvious.

"Thank you," she said, and Greshal bowed. "I know I can trust you to say nothing of this. I will have these contents checked. If anything detrimental to the High Prince should be revealed, Kavaul will be appropriately dealt with. No blame will be attached to you."

He bowed again. Neither of them mentioned Nerogun, although, she thought, the probability of his involvement must be strong in both their minds. If Nerogun were found to have been poisoning the Prince, that would be high treason. And a very dangerous thing to have discovered. Meya covered the stoneware bottle with her cloak, and checked the corridor was still empty, before carrying it away.

She left Greshal and went straight to the still room, to which she had a key. Nobody followed her that she could detect; and she was skilled at detecting followers. If anyone had spied her in the corridor, she thought, they could hardly complain of her unusual movements; for she was often in the still room looking out remedies for sick servants, with the help of the Herb-Master's assistant, the dutiful Boral.

Today the place was empty. She listened to the echo of her own feet as she walked slowly along the line of shelves, studying the vials and flasks and tubs. After some thought she placed her bottle at the back of a row near the top, amongst a dozen similar bottles. Similar but not identical to her own. Although she would know it again, she marked it with a dead moth at its base to be quite sure.

Then she went to look for Boral, whom she intended to ask to identify the ingredients – or to attempt to, at least. Naturally she would not tell Boral where the liquid had come from. She would say she'd found it in an obscure corner of the still-room. Boral would know that was not true; but it would cover her.

She found Boral downstairs in the servants' sick-room. It was a tiny chamber with a mere two beds, for it was in reality no more than a holding room for any ill servants, until they could be moved out of the castle without risk of infection or offence to any nobles.

There were two other women there with Boral: both Riders of the Vonn. Meya swiftly brought their names to mind and said,

"My lady Shebel. My lady Durba. You are welcome here. I hope Boral has been able to supply you with the medicine you need?"

She expected no reply from Durba, and received none but a smile. Durba wore riding breeches, unlike the more attractive Shebel who looked most womanly in a long dress. Meya approved of her: a gentle woman, she thought, not as rough and ready as some of the female Riders. She had not disliked the female Riders – in fact, she admired some aspects of their straightforward manners – but she had found their forthrightness disconcerting. That woman called Delgeb in particular. While forthrightness was a quality that Meya valued, it was not often prudent within the castle walls.

"My Lady Meya," said Shebel with a graceful curtsy. Her voice was low and musical. "I need no medicine for myself, although the knowledge I seek might perhaps be useful in developing remedies for pain. Recently, just after you first introduced us, I brought Boral a sample of the drug the stonemen use – a paste that they call Athelid – in the hope that she could tell me what is in it."

"Ah, I think I have heard that mentioned at the dinner table. A painkiller, I understand. Have you been able to identify it, Boral?"

Her herb-mistress curtsied lower and less gracefully than Shebel had, and addressed her with her head down. Even in private Boral would never speak to her with familiarity. Sometimes Meya wearied of it.

That is why I like the Riders' forthrightness, she thought in some surprise, because they talk to me as if I were an ordinary woman. As long as they do not carry it too far.

"The main component is ethlon, which Lady Shebel had suggested it might be," said Boral,

almost whispering. "I was able to do a test for that. But the tests I have done for other ingredients have brought no results. I think the paste may contain zalephony, but whether that is merely for flavouring or because it reacts with another unknown component, I cannot say."

"I tried a bit myself," said Shebel. "The tiniest amount. A grain. It knocked me out for three hours."

Durba rolled her eyes theatrically, and shook her head.

"Was that wise?" asked Meya, thinking of her own sampling of an unknown potion only half an hour ago.

"Well, we knew that it isn't actually poisonous," said Shebel. "The stonemen take it daily, after all."

"I have made a tincture of it, highly diluted, to try out on my, my animals," said Boral. She would not say the word *rats* in front of any ladies. But Meya was well aware of the creatures kept in the stables and carefully nurtured by the herb-mistress. The happiest rats in Kelvha, for Boral would not give them anything she thought might kill them.

Boral held out a glass vial of faintly cloudy liquid. "This is Athelid diluted one part to forty of water."

All these potions, Meya thought as she took the vial and sniffed at it. She noted the sweet familiar scent of zalephony, often used to mask less pleasant ingredients. With a half-formed idea she dabbed her index finger into the vial, withdrew and licked it.

"My lady! Please! Oh, rinse your mouth, I beg you!"

The terrified Boral darted to the basin to fetch her a cup of water. Meya rinsed her mouth obediently, but she felt no alarm.

What she felt was recognition. That faint, sour, slightly oily taste: that was not zalephony. It was the same as that she had just sampled in Kavaul's room. The memory was recent enough for her to be quite certain.

Should she tell Boral, or the Riders?

No. First she had to think about the implications. Say nothing yet.

So she was still sipping water from Boral's cup, working out some innocuous remark to make, when any words were forestalled by an abrupt metallic clamour somewhere in the castle: a repeated, heavy clang.

## *Chapter 27*

Durba jumped in shock. Shebel and Boral looked alarmed.

However, Meya immediately recognised the banging of a gong, one of the many that could be found in every tower of the castle. Whenever one gong was set ringing, the footmen hurried to ring the others, spreading the alarm. While the ostensible reason for them was to warn of fires, the gongs were rung more often than not by outraged nobles – demanding the presence either of dilatory servants, or of the guards to haul away the same servants after they had caused annoyance.

Through the still-room window she heard a faint shout of “Guards! Here, to me!” That would seem to indicate the last: except that the voice was Nerogun’s. And Nerogun seldom called the guards for trivial misdemeanours – he usually dealt with any disobedience himself.

Meya put down the vial with assumed calmness. “Ah, some trouble with the servants, no doubt. You must excuse me, ladies. Boral will bring you refreshments if you care for them. I had better go and see which footman has just overstepped the limit,” she said, and left the room, taking care to conceal her sudden anxiety.

What could have caused Nerogun’s displeasure? It was always difficult to deal with. And if he found any fault with the servants, he liked, if possible, to lay it at her door. So she was apprehensive as she walked swiftly down the corridor.

The shuddering clangs of the gong had come from the west courtyard. When Meya hurried out into the open space she saw Nerogun standing at the entrance to the north-west tower. He was shouting at a troop of soldiers who were running towards him; then he turned and dived into the tower. It was the tower where her own quarters were – along with those of several other ladies of the castle – and her heart missed a beat.

What could Nerogun have found? Nothing that was to do with her, surely. She had no secrets; or rather, she had many, but they were only in her head. It was more likely to be an attempted theft from some lady’s apartments. So Meya told herself, but with misgivings that she could not dispel.

The soldiers had already run past the door to her own quarters on the ground floor and were disappearing clatteringly up the stone stairs by the time she entered the tower’s high chilly hallway. She gathered up her skirts to hasten after them as quickly as she could, for her mind was suddenly filled with unaccountable dread.

“Here! Troops, over here! Hold him! Guard the stairs! We’ll have him put in chains before we take him off,” cried Nerogun from the landing just above her.

So it must be a servant, then. Only servants could be chained. She arrived on the landing a few seconds behind the soldiers, panting hard, and saw a footman struggling to escape the grasp of the two foremost guards.

It was Lorolo. Once the guards had a secure hold of him, arms twisted round behind his back, the Post-Regent descended on him, face distorted in fury and contempt. Nerogun began to stab the captive footman with a forefinger in the chest, and shouted at him, his voice thick with anger. Lorolo was an upstart bastard of a southerner, a rag not fit to wipe the shoes of his superiors, a lecherous goat that deserved to be castrated before having its throat cut.

Lorolo did not shout back. Despite his continuing struggles he looked stunned. He was only half-dressed, his breeches loose; and with a sinking heart Meya guessed what must have happened even before she peered into the nearest chamber – a linen-room – and saw

the Lady Janeya there, also partly disrobed, her petticoat untied. Janeya too was struggling to get free, not against soldiers but against the arms of three distraught ladies' maids who restrained her from reaching out to Lorolo.

Meya went up to her and looked her in the face. She wanted to tell her what a foolish, blind and careless girl she was, but pity held her back.

"Who found you?" she said.

Janeya looked at Nerogun. She could not speak. She was shaking and crying silently, tears streaking down her face and onto the maids' restraining hands.

"Take her downstairs to my quarters, to my bed-chamber," said Meya to the maids, before turning to address the Post-Regent in her most regal manner. "I trust you will allow me to deal with the lady." By her tone she hoped to give him no option.

"She deserves," panted Nerogun, "she deserves to be whipped, stripped and whipped, alongside this gutter-drinker." He slapped the captive Lorolo hard across the face.

"That will not happen," said Meya, "not to Janeya." She spoke with as much authority as she dared.

"Then put her in your room for now," said the Post-Regent, his face twisted almost manically with disgust and fury. "I'll see to that so-called lady later. But this one is mine."

Meya shrugged and turned away. Although she felt sick with fear it was chiefly for Janeya. She could do nothing to save Lorolo and it would cause more harm than good to try.

Instead she ushered the maids and Janeya past the soldiers, who looked at them with ill-concealed curiosity. Nerogun had already let slip far too much. There would be no keeping this quiet.

"Let us pass," she said commandingly. "Cannot you see how distressed the poor girl is? It's not the first time this footman has had too much to drink and tried to assault an innocent maiden. But it's the last time he will do it to a lady of the castle." She stared hard and severely at the sergeant, whom she knew a little.

"Yes, ma'am," he said soberly. "We see how it was."

She nodded and led Janeya past them and down the stairs. Fortunately the girl was still incapable of speech. She shook with great, wrenching sobs, stumbling blindly in Meya's implacable grip, while the maids scurried after them.

Not until they were safely inside Meya's quarters did Janeya find her tongue. Then she turned on Meya, crying out in anguish,

"How could you say that? That Lorolo assaulted me?"

"Be quiet," commanded Meya.

"You know that he – I – I swear he did not, I swear on all the stars that Lorolo is as innocent as–"

"Be quiet," Meya said again. She looked at the three maids. Good girls, all of them, but terrified. "Did you see what happened?" she demanded of them sternly.

"I was tidying my lady's room," said Piril, Janeya's maid, in a low voice, "when I heard the Lord Nerogun shouting. And then I heard my lady call out in distress, and the banging of the gong, so I fetched these two from the Lady Sina's chambers because I thought – well, I thought three of us might protect her better from the guards, Ma'am."

"You knew the guards were coming for Janeya?" Meya was immediately suspicious.

"No, but I was afraid – no, Ma'am, I mean I knew that – but I did not expect..." The girl's voice trailed away.

Meya nodded. "I tell you now, you knew nothing of this unseemly desire of Lorolo's at all, until today, any of you," she said carefully to all three maids. "You knew of no attachment on either side. This has been as great a shock to you as it is to me."

"Ma'am." They bobbed.

"Piril, you will stay here with your mistress. You other two may go back to your duties. I expect Nerogun will want to speak to you. When he summons you, claim absolute ignorance. Let him call you stupid. Let him call you foolish half-wits. You were ignorant of the whole thing. Do you understand?"

"Ma'am." More bobs.

She let two of the maids out. The third, Piril, she kept within the room.

"I will have to lock you both in when I leave in a few moments," she said to the sobbing, distraught Janeya and the silent, downcast maid. "I will speak to Nerogun as soon as I am able. I shall request that Lady Janeya be permitted to return to her own quarters once she has recovered from the shock of being assaulted."

"I wasn't assaulted!" Janeya burst out. "You know that! How can you say such things about Lorolo? You know I love him!"

"I know nothing of the kind," Meya said severely, "and neither do you. Piril, the footman Lorolo clearly pulled your mistress into the linen-room and there attempted acts of violation."

"He didn't!" cried Janeya, the sobs breaking up her voice. "He didn't! I met him there! What will they do to him? You have to help him, Meya! You have to!"

"That is out of my power," said Meya. "Piril. Make your mistress decent. Wash her face. Calm her if you can. Let her lie upon the bed and see if she can sleep."

"Sleep? *Sleep*? How can I sleep?"

She ignored Janeya. "Keep her quiet, at least, if at all possible. I will return soon."

Then she slipped out of the room and locked the door behind her. Once in the passage she leant against the door's solid, ancient wood, trying to calm herself, to ease the rapid thudding of her heart.

I am my father's daughter, Meya thought, and this is my campaign. My coming battle. But oh, why did I not speak to Greshal the steward about moving Lorolo? Why did I not arrange for the boy to be transferred as soon as I learnt of the liaison?

"Foolish, foolish woman," she said aloud, and this time she did not mean Janeya.

As if summoned by her thoughts – though now too late – she saw Greshal enter the tower at the passage's far end. He walked towards her, his face full of doubt.

"I heard the gong," he said. "What was it, Lady Meya?"

"Lorolo. The footman. Has been caught attacking one of the High Ladies." Her mouth felt numb as she said it.

She saw the unfeigned shock in Greshal's face. "But that is so unlike him – he is such a willing boy," he said.

"So I thought. We were deceived," she answered shortly; but she thought, *Good*. Greshal had probably been in ignorance of Janeya's attachment to Lorolo. She hoped that most of the castle had been ignorant likewise.

"I am about to go and see Nerogun about what should be done with Lorolo," she said.

"He will have to leave the castle," answered Greshal in a low voice.

Meya nodded. He undoubtedly would, one way or another. She did not attempt to excuse him even to the steward. Whether or not Janeya had been willing, he had overstepped his place in the worst possible way.

For she knew that there was nothing she could say or do to save Lorolo now. She had been too slow to act. Her fault. She would have to work hard, just to save Janeya.

## Chapter 28

"The Lady Janeya is deeply distressed," she told Nerogun with all the aloof dignity that she could muster. But no emotion, because Nerogun liked distress, and she would not give him the gratification of seeing her own.

It had taken her a while to track down the Post-Regent. Eventually she had found the Sergeant of the Guard, who told her sombrely that Lorolo had been dragged off, not to the Tell Tower, as she had expected, but to the dungeons underneath the armoury.

Meya was not sure if that boded worse or better for Lorolo than the Tell Tower. She felt some sympathy for him, but did not allow herself to feel too much, because he had got himself into this position. He must have known how totally forbidden his actions were. A low-born, foreign, vain and foolish boy.

When she descended the damp stone steps into the basement where the dungeons were, she felt the chill wrap itself around her like a shroud. It was dark, the gloom barely made coherent by the scattered flaring torches set along the wall.

She saw Nerogun there in the shadowy tunnel ahead of her, talking to the armourer Iajo: a mannerless brute of a man whom she knew little and liked less. She did not approve of the way his eyes raked over her as she approached. Ignoring him, she addressed herself only to Nerogun.

"Oh, Janeya is very distressed, I am sure," said Nerogun with a sneer. "Most dismayed at having her debauchery found out. And with a foreign slave! Did she think no-one would ever realise?"

"I have no idea what you may think you know, my lord," answered Meya stiffly, "but I can assure you that as far as I am concerned, Lorolo's uninvited assault on the Lady Janeya came as a complete shock to her."

"Oh, yes, very shocked she looked when I walked in on them! Quite aghast, with her petticoat around her ankles!"

Iajo laughed. Meya wondered if she dared reprove him – dared reprove either of them – and decided not. It was clear that Janeya had been spied upon and betrayed to Nerogun; probably by one of the maids. But for Meya to express any sympathy with Janeya would be most unwise.

"May I see the prisoner?" she asked. The three heavy dungeon doors were all closed, the small barred windows in each one obscured by shutters. Whichever of the dungeons held Lorolo, she could hear nothing. Not so much as a whimper.

"You wouldn't want to," said Iajo with a leer. "Not a pretty sight, at present."

It crossed her mind that he might already be dead. And that that might be the best thing for all concerned. "He will be whipped, of course, and returned to his home town in disgrace," she said coolly.

"Whipping will be the least of it," said Nerogun.

"And the Lady Janeya?" she said.

"What of the low, degraded, shameless bitch?"

She looked him full in the face. "My Lord, she is a high lady of the castle. I trust you will not speak of her that way before her uncle." The Keeper of the Keys was of high standing if not high understanding. Janeya's father had stood higher still amongst Kelvhan nobility; it was a shame, she thought, that he was dead.

"Melegan has been too lax with her. She may have deluded him – he's not the brightest spark – but she does not cozen me. I will speak of her exactly how she is," retorted the Post-Regent.

"What do you intend to do with her?" asked Meya as calmly as she could.

"I will consider."

"Exile?" It came to her that once she herself was married, she could offer Janeya a home outside the castle. Although it was hardly fair to embroil Huldarion in this scandal, she ought to do all that she could.

But Nerogun was shaking his head. "Oh, no, I think exile is too easy on her. I think she should be publicly disgraced."

Meya was about to ask why; but her mind leapt immediately to the answer. She knew why.

Because the idle and benevolent Melegan, she thought, is not to Nerogun's liking. Nerogun wants the Keeper of the Keys brought down by several rungs, and his power redistributed. She had a strong instinct about who the new Keeper of the Keys might be.

She could say none of this. Instead she dropped a low, respectful curtsey. "While you complete your deliberations, may the Lady Janeya return to her own quarters?"

"No, she may not."

"Then perhaps it is best if I keep her in my rooms for now," said Meya. "They are secure. Being on the ground floor, my windows are barred. May I ask the Sergeant to appoint a guard to be set outside my door?"

Nerogun frowned, but he could hardly object to that. "For now," he said. He gave her a dismissive wave of the hand, and then began to turn away; but she persisted.

"My lord, I ask you to say nothing publicly of this affair until the full truth can be ascertained."

At that he turned back to her with a sneer. "Oh, you're worried about Huldarion, are you? Afraid that he'll back out of the marriage once he discovers what the Kelvhan ladies get up to?"

"I imagine that you would not want that to happen," she said evenly. And that did make the Post-Regent consider for a moment. He chewed his lip.

"Hah! All right. We'll keep it quiet until he's ridden away to battle."

"When will that be?"

"I thought you'd know all his plans," said Nerogun with another sneer. "And you must say nothing to him of it either. No going whining to him and asking him to intervene on the whore's behalf! This is Kelvhan business, and it stays inside the castle."

"I would not dream of mentioning it, my lord," she said, and dropped another cold curtsey before walking away. When she was half-way to the stairs Iajo made some inaudible comment and both men laughed.

She left the clammy darkness of the dungeons and ascended with relief into the sunshine. The Sergeant was soon found, and two men were dispatched to stand guard outside her door. The Sergeant asked no questions and she offered no explanations. The guards would not stop Nerogun if he decided to enter and remove Janeya; but their presence might make him decide that such removal was unnecessary.

She returned to Janeya's own quarters – inhabited at present only by a lower maid who was weeping as she swept – and organised the packing up of clothes and other items that Janeya might need. Janeya would sleep in Meya's bed: Meya would sleep in her maid's bed, Piril could have the couch, and her own maid, Eral, would have to make shift for herself somewhere. She deplored the upheaval that was necessary.



Next she visited the kitchens to arrange for food to be delivered to her rooms.

"For how long?" asked Hilfa, the second cook, in surprise and faint exasperation.

"I don't yet know. The Lady Janeya is unwell." Meya hesitated. Some rumour or other was bound to reach the kitchens before long. "She has been upset by the unwanted advances of a lower ranking man. She needs quiet company at present."

"Hah," said Hilfa. "We know all about that sort of thing." She nodded over her shoulder. "The other one with unwanted advances. Any news yet about moving her?"

"Not yet," said Meya, turning to look at the scullery-maid, Felipa, who stood pale and listless by the sink. That was another task she must not leave too late. While it was fresh in her mind she returned to the servants' hall to see Greshal for the second time that day, and asked him to arrange for an alternative posting for the pregnant girl.

At least Janeya is not pregnant, she thought. Dear stars, I hope not. What a complication that would be.

"I can probably arrange to get the maid a place in Outer Kelvha," said Greshal. "On a farm or some such. And Lorolo?"

"I think it certain that he will be removed from his post permanently. You need take no action."

"He was an obliging boy," said Greshal. He made no further comment. But his face was grim and set. He knew how the castle worked. Meya, for the first time, felt a little shame and sick apprehension at the thought of what Lorolo might now be suffering – if he were still alive.

Forget it, ignore it, there is nothing you can do, she advised herself as she walked back through the winding passages of the castle. Lorolo was guilty. He must have known that leading Janeya on would be disastrous.

But what if he loved her?

Meya thought about Huldarion, whom she did not love. She did not understand what love was, unless it were love for a child. And then her mind turned to Aliya: how she must protect her daughter from anything like this, from any possibility of this constricted, shackled life lived under such surveillance. It had not seemed like a prison to Meya when she was young, but she was wiser now.

Tonight I must dine again with Huldarion, she thought. And say nothing of all these dreadful things. The idea of him sitting opposite her made her shiver; yet with no fear, except of all that she now had to hide. There was something else there in her shiver when she thought of him. Anticipation. She could admit that to herself. And interest in the man behind the scars.

But she would not visit him in his room again just yet. Especially not just now. She still did not know how to talk to him. Bedding him was the easy part. Everything else was not. She already felt she had given away too much of herself: and now these added secrets... To talk to him would be doubly difficult.

All the same, she remembered that she needed to let Huldarion know about the adulterated wine. She might be hard-pressed to do that this evening. But if he was forced to drink it, at least the unknown drug would be diluted.

That reminded her of Boral and Shebel, whom she had abandoned in the sick-room several hours ago. Meya returned there now and found it empty. She sat down heavily on one of the beds and closed her eyes, letting her shoulders slump for a moment now that nobody was watching.

I am like a jay, she mused somewhat bitterly, a well-adorned and bustling bird that hurries round the castle in an endless search for buried acorns. Or trying to bury acorns where others will not find them. What chance have I against the watching crows? And what will I need to bury next?

Eventually she stood up, squared her shoulders and walked briskly back to her own rooms where the pair of guards now stood barring the way.

"I trust I am allowed into my own chamber," she said severely to the men, who looked a little shame-faced as they stepped aside for her. As soon as she entered, she saw why they had appeared abashed. Janeya was still there, thankfully, but so were two other ladies – Sina, which was bad enough – and, worse still, Durba, the mute Rider of the Vonn.

She strode back to reprimand the guards. "What are they doing here? Why did you let them in?"

"They were already in your chambers when we arrived on duty, ma'am," one muttered.

"It's quite true," said Sina, who had followed Meyya to the door and now spoke with unaccustomed boldness. "My maid told me Janeya was in trouble, so I came straight here to see how I could help."

"But the Rider!" Meyya was appalled at the stranger's presence. The mute woman had strolled up to join Sina and was holding her arm; so Meyya marched the pair of them back into the parlour, closing all the doors behind her to make sure that there was no chance of the guards overhearing anything. She was thankful for the certainty that her chambers held no spyholes.

"I saw Durba in the corridor and I asked her to accompany me," said Sina.

"You *what*?"

"Durba is my friend," said Sina, in a voice much louder than her usual mouse's squeak. "Her presence gives me courage." Meyya scrutinised her with some amazement. Sina had indeed shown courage for one normally so timid.

But to drag a Rider into the middle of this mess...

"Lady Durba's presence means the spreading of rumour and potential scandal straight into the Riders' camp," she told Sina reprovingly.

"No, it doesn't. She can't speak."

"She can write."

"But she won't. She's discreet – aren't you, Durba?"

The woman nodded. Meyya had no faith in her discretion; but it was too late now. She strode into her bedroom to find Janeya, who was lying stretched out on the bed – no longer crying, thank the stars, although her face was damp and streaked with tears.

On Meyya's entrance she sat up at once. "How is Lorolo? Have you seen him? Where is he?"

Meyya found it difficult to answer. "I haven't seen him. Nerogun has him held somewhere. I'm not sure where exactly. But not in the Tell Tower, I know that much," she added, for the tower was notorious for holding prisoners: or rather, for not holding them. Too many supposed suicides had been found lying at its base for anyone to contemplate a stay there without fear.

Janeya let out a shuddering sigh that might have been relief. "What will happen to him?"

"I don't know." Meyya sat down on the bed, and tried to take Janeya in her arms. It was not successful; the girl pulled away. So she sat back again. "I have suggested to Nerogun that Lorolo should be exiled – sent back home."

Janeya nodded dully and put her hands up to her cheeks. "I pray they'll do so," she murmured. Although Meyya thought it unlikely that that was all that Lorolo would suffer, she made no comment.

Not a word from Janeya about what might happen to *her*. She probably hadn't even thought about it yet. So Meya would have to.

Public disgrace, Nerogun had said. What form would that take? It would not be pretty. The precedents were not good. She patted Janeya's unresponding hand, whilst thinking of the Lady Chireya, who had been at the centre of those whispered stories fifteen years ago – her affair with the castle steward, her disgrace and eventual suicide. A fall from the Tell Tower, naturally. And the steward had ranked much higher than poor Lorolo. Although the old king had still been alive then, his health was poor; Nerogun was already Regent in all but name.

Oh, Janeya, she thought. What do I do with you? Once I am married to Huldarion I might be able to take you out of here – but only if Nerogun lets me. If he allows you to stay alive that long.

And he certainly will not let me if I seem to care too much about you. He takes pleasure in thwarting me: a woman who does what she wants is anathema to him. So I must be cautious.

"I need to change my dress, and go to dinner with the nobles," she told Janeya. "Nothing will be said about you there. Nerogun is happy to keep the matter quiet." For the moment. "Food will be brought here for you and the maids. So stay calm and try to rest until I come back."

When she bent again and attempted to kiss Janeya, the girl turned her face away. Meya shrugged mentally. She knew she was at present the most useful friend Janeya had inside the castle, and it was a pity Janeya did not realise it.

She turned to Sina. "Do you wish to stay here with her?"

Sina nodded.

"Very well. But I am afraid Lady Durba must leave," said Meya firmly. Sina was beginning to remonstrate when Durba stilled her with an embrace and many gestures. Sina clung to her, but Durba gently put her aside. She mouthed *Tomorrow*, and bowed to Meya before walking from the room.

After Meya had changed her dress – neither high-born girl offering her any privacy, which annoyed her slightly – she spoke to the two maids, Eral and Piril, counselling them not to leave Janeya unattended. She was stern with them, she knew. For who had betrayed Janeya? She had thought Piril a steady maid-servant, but somebody had given Janeya away to Nerogun: somebody close enough to see what was going on.

And now at her harsh tone the girl began to weep, sobs wrung painfully out of her. It was exasperating. Piril was not normally so feeble – not like some of the other maids.

"What is it, Piril?" she demanded.

The girl shook her head. Meya's own maid Eral gave her an appealing look. So Meya took Eral aside and listened to her faint apologetic murmurs.

"My lady, Piril did not mean for this to happen. But the Lord Post-Regent commanded her to keep a watch on Lady Janeya, and to let him know if she was to meet Lorolo."

"I see."

"The Lord Nerogun said that – well, you see, the thing is, Piril has a brother working in the stables, and he – he – well, the Lord Post-Regent said he had been..." Eral took a deep breath and leaned forward to mouth in Meya's ear. "Caught with another stable-boy."

Meya nodded resignedly, and turned to the weeping maid. "Piril. You did both wrong and right. The Lord Nerogun must be obeyed, but betraying your mistress was wrong."

"Lord Nerogun already knew about Lorolo," Piril whispered.

What did he not know? The thought froze Meya's heart. Janeya had been watched through the spyholes, or followed on Nerogun's orders, doubtless. Spies everywhere. And Nerogun just waiting for his chance to seize his prey.

"Well, what's done is done," she said. "But your mistress is in great trouble, Piril. Be loyal to her now. Support her in any way that you are able."

The maid controlled her sobs at last. "Yes, ma'am. I will, I promise. But – but, what about my brother?"

"You have done all you can for him," said Meya. She doubted very much if the stable-boy would be pardoned, no matter how many orders Piril followed. The ways of the castle would not allow it.

I hate this place, she thought suddenly and vehemently, and then was shocked: for it was something she had never thought before. Her devotion to Kelvha, its great castle and its ancient families had shaped her life.

Yet she was aware of a double strand of thought about her home. Proud of the castle's long history, she had sometimes vowed she would do anything to save it from destruction. Even so she did not want her daughter to grow up here. Increasingly she saw the hollowness behind the imperious walls and fine adornments: the castle's very fabric seemed to be full of holes.

How much of that is due to Nerogun? she wondered, as the guards let her out of her own quarters. Lifting her heavy skirts so that they did not brush the cobbles, she crossed the courtyard, aware that she was surely watched from some high window or another.

Nerogun has made Kelvha strong, she thought. When the old king grew weak it was Nerogun who forged alliances, fought the rebels, and strengthened both our borders and our trade. Kelvha has seldom been so prosperous as it is now – thanks to him.

And the castle's spyholes predate Nerogun by centuries. The customs have not changed. So what right do I have to complain?

## Chapter 29

When Meya walked into the banqueting hall and saw the rows of diners rise politely at her entrance, she thought the horrors of the day must be obvious in her face. She felt almost exhausted. But no-one looked at her closely as she crossed the hall to take her place at table, except perhaps Nerogun, whose frowning gaze prompted her to assume an air of casual aloofness: and Huldarion.

He and his closest Riders had been out hunting for the day with Prince Faldron and a large retinue of nobles, in the hunting forest some way to the south-west of the city. They had found boar; or, rather, boar had been found for them. The hunt provided so much matter for conversation that thankfully Meya needed to say little. She was able to sit silently through the main courses, picking at her food, until the desserts were served.

She found herself marvelling that everything could carry on with such an appearance of normality, when just beneath the surface all was turmoil. But she must not show the turmoil in her mind.

"My lady. I hope your day has been pleasant?" Huldarion asked her during a gap in the chatter.

"My day has been entirely unremarkable," she said calmly. "Will you have another pastry?"

Huldarion declined.

"More wine?" asked Nerogun, and Faldron, to his left, immediately gestured to his manservant.

"You liked my Weldish wine the other night," the Prince said. "Have some more now, Huldarion."

Meya saw Huldarion hesitate. She picked up the plate of delicate pastry offerings and held it out again, saying, "A small one will not hurt you."

She smiled at him. He took the smallest of the pastries and then said to Faldron,

"A half glass, if I may. A day's riding always makes me tired, and you would not wish to have me snoring at the table."

Next to him, Thoronal looked round in some surprise.

"It usually takes more than that," he said. Meya was exasperated. Had the man no discretion? Uld was a wiser man, in her opinion, and a pleasanter. She did not care for Solon, who was entertaining but sarcastic. As for the other three, the younger ones – they were obviously on their best behaviour. Bland. Though all very handsome, if you liked that sort of thing.

Clearly Idria did. A subtle peek at the princess revealed that she was peeking in her turn at the one called Sashel. Meya sighed inwardly. Another foolish girl to worry about. As if she didn't have enough of them on her hands... She applied herself determinedly to her pastry and allowed the talk of spears and hunting dogs to flow around her.

But she was not permitted to relax for long. Halfway through the sweetmeats, a serving maid came hurrying in, not carrying any dishes, and stumbled as she tried to curtsy, her mouth opening and closing in a silent stammer.

Meya felt an instant shock of alarm. No servant should interrupt a dinner in this way unless there was a fire, or flood, or similar catastrophe.

*Janeya*, she thought. Has she got out somehow?

"What is it, girl?" snapped Nerogun.

"If you please, sir, ma'am – my Lady Meya – please, ma'am, there is a – a difficulty in the kitchens," the girl said breathlessly.

"What has that to do with the Lady Meya? Sort it out yourselves," growled the Post-Regent. The girl dropped another half-curtsey and looked helplessly at Meya.

"I had better go and see what the problem is," she said, rising from her seat with apprehensive resignation.

"You have made those servants too dependent on you," grumbled Nerogun, and then with a glance at Huldarion, added, "It is a fine quality in a woman, of course, to have the obedience of her servants."

"Indeed," replied Huldarion. She did not look at him as she left the table.

The maid ran in front of her but did not speak until they were safely out of the banquetting-hall.

"Oh, Ma'am! It's Felipa! She said she didn't feel well earlier, but now..."

The baby, thought Meya immediately. The non-baby. The little scrap too young to be born. Poor Felipa. Or fortunate Felipa.

"Where is she?" she said as she swept into the kitchen. The decorated fruited jellies were ready on the central table but nobody was preparing to carry them through into the hall. Two of the serving-maids were hurrying back and forth with cloths: two more stood idle by the great flour-strewn pastry table, weeping helplessly.

She soon saw why. When she went into the scullery Felipa lay on the cold tiled floor, surrounded by a pool of her own blood. She was very still.

"She's dead," said Hilfa, who knelt beside her, ignoring the blood that seeped up her apron. The cook was gently stroking the girl's dark hair. "I didn't know. I didn't realise how bad it was... She said she felt ill earlier today. But she didn't even cry out. Nemis came in here and found her fallen."

Poor Felipa, thought Meya, too obedient in her pain and panic to even call for help. She bent and checked for a pulse at wrist and throat. There was none.

"Oh, ma'am! What do we do?"

I don't need this, said Meya to herself as she straightened up. Not now. Then she was appalled at her own selfishness.

She looked at Hilfa. A sensible woman. "Summon Greshal," she commanded, "and ask him to come here with a strong footman – a reliable one. Obor will do, if he can be found quickly. Tell them to bring a blanket. I will ask them to remove Felipa discreetly to the sick-room until some arrangement can be made to take the body out of the castle."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

"I will try to arrange a decent burial. Do we know who her family are?"

The cook shook her head. "I don't, ma'am. There's nobody here from her village. Mr Greshal might know."

Greshal, thankfully, was quick to arrive. He hurried in no more than a minute later, along with a tall, taciturn footman. But he was no wiser about Felipa's family than Hilfa had been. He shook his head sorrowfully at the lifeless body on the scullery floor.

"The old story, I suppose... To the sick room, you said, my lady?"

"Wait," said Meya. She had spent the brief interval thinking.

Hilfa had retreated to the kitchen. Now Meya spoke to the two men alone, the bloodied corpse seeming to listen also. "Not the sick room. Take her to the Tell Tower. It will be unlocked at present, being empty." She had herself supervised the cleaning of it only a week ago. "Lay her in the closet there, deep around the left-hand corner. You will see where, when you go in. Lay her down there out of sight."

"My lady?" Greshal looked at her questioningly.

"This is for privacy, you understand?" she said severely. "I do not wish anyone else to find her and guess at her state. It is all too obvious. I would have her name remain unblemished. Poor girl, it's all that I can do for her. Do not tell the servants where she is. Let them think that she is in the sick room."

"Very good, my lady." He nodded at Obor, and the footman began to unroll the blanket.

"I know that I can trust you to be discreet, Obor," added Meya. "Your discretion will bring due reward."

The footman looked up at her and nodded. Meya did not linger to say more: for time was ticking away. If she waited any longer, someone might be sent to find her and fetch her to the dining-hall.

So she walked briskly back into the kitchens, picked up a rolling pin and used it to sweep the waiting jellies off the table. They fell in trembling, broken mounds along the floor. All the kitchen women ceased their weeping and huddled talk to stare at her open-mouthed.

"That is the cause of the disturbance," Meya announced. "The jellies have been ruined, sadly. No other courses need be served. None of you need re-enter the dining room until the guests have left. I will allay any displeasure felt by them. You may start to clear the jellies up now."

With these commands she left them open-mouthed and curtsying, and marched back towards the dining-hall. Just in time: a footman, one less reliable than Obor, was walking down to meet her. She motioned him to turn round and lead her back in.

She smiled at Huldarion as she retook her place at the table: a tight, annoyed smile. No harm in showing how stressed she was as long as she kept the true cause secret.

"I trust there has been no disaster in the kitchens," said Thoronal, that heavy-footed man. Huldarion said nothing. After a first keen glance at her, he looked down at his goblet.

"Unless you call the loss of our final course a disaster," said Meya with what she hoped was the right degree of exasperation. "I am afraid that there will be no fruited jellies. These sweetmeats will have to suffice."

"The return of your company gives us all the pleasure that we could desire," said Huldarion. A good, flowery, diplomat's answer. It made Nerogun smirk.

"How on earth did that happen?" the Post-Regent muttered to her once she was seated.

"One of the maids was taken ill," she murmured back. "She fainted all over the jellies, and the staff panicked."

"Have her whipped!"

"For now I have had her taken to the sick-room," Meya said. "The whipping can wait. I have had quite enough unpleasantness for one day." She spoke acerbically, and Nerogun snorted in seeming amusement.

Then she turned round to make forced conversation with the other Riders about the sweetmeats of Caervonn – not as sophisticated as Kelvhan delicacies, apparently. She could not have cared less and it probably showed.

"Since we are deprived of jellies, perhaps we should retire," said Nerogun at last. "I daresay you are tired, Faldron."

"I am, quite," said the Prince, stifling a yawn.

"And my Lord Huldarion. The hunt will have fatigued you also."

"Yes, I believe you are right." Huldarion pushed away his empty goblet. "An early night, I think."

"You probably won't want to stroll in the gardens this evening," suggested Nerogun.

"No, I think not," said Huldarion; at which Nerogun seemed to hide a smile. As they all rose to depart, the servants stepping forward to move back their chairs, Huldarion walked round to Meya and held out his hand to her.

"My lady Meya," he said, "I wish you a most peaceful night."

"And I you." She wanted to speak to him – a sentence only – three words would do – but she could not without being overheard, and was wretched and frustrated. Too many problems, all at once, and it seemed to be up to her to solve them all.

Holding her hand lightly, Huldarion studied her face. Then he bent forward to kiss her cheek with careful but gentle formality. While his scarred ear was to her lips, she murmured to him.

"A quarter strength."

At that moment she was glad of his inscrutability. He made no sign but merely pressed her hand and said,

"Good night, my Lady Meya."

After they had all departed she found Nerogun was watching her. She turned to him and said wearily,

"Well, apart from the jellies I think that went sufficiently well. I will go to my rooms now. I have the headache, and trust I may have some peace after all this disturbance."

"We will talk tomorrow about the unruly girl," he said. The footmen were still present, so Janeya's name could not be mentioned.

"Indeed. Good night, my lord."

She dropped Nerogun her deepest, most ceremonial curtsy. He seemed to be in a satisfied mood.

Goodness knows how he will spend his night, she thought. I will have to find him again before the hour is up: I hope he won't have disappeared.

But before then there is much to do.

The guards outside her quarters saluted her. She waited impatiently for them to unlock her door. On entering she heard, to her relief, that all was quiet, with only a murmuring of voices from within her bedroom. When she walked in she was less pleased to find that Durba was there again.

"I thought you'd gone," she said accusingly.

"She only went into the closet," said Sina. "She's offered to do anything she can to help us."

"What could she do to help us?" demanded Meya. "And how exactly did she offer?"

Durba bowed, put her hand to her chest and held it out open-palmed.

"That's all very well," snapped Meya, "but you have to go now. I have too many things to organise."

"Durba's on our side," urged Sina. "She's offered to smuggle Janeya out and lodge her with the female Riders. She wrote it down. We burned the paper."

"Thank goodness you showed some sense there. As for smuggling her past the guards, that's nonsense and you know it." Meya sat down heavily on the chair, since there was no room on the bed. She had so little time. She did not want to involve the female Rider, but the Rider seemed determined to be involved.

And Durba's offer, it occurred to her, might just solve one problem: it might fasten one more link in the chain she was trying, mentally, to construct. She looked round at the anxious faces of the women. She would need the help of all of them, the maids included.

"Did you talk to Nerogun?" asked Janeya plaintively.



"Nerogun will not pardon you," said Meya. "He will not let you off." She had not needed to talk to him to know that.

"Then what will happen?"

"He wishes for you to be publicly disgraced."

Janeya uttered a small cry of despair and dismay, and then said, "Well, I don't care. Whatever happens to Lorolo should happen to me too. That's only justice."

"Believe me, you do not want to share the same fate as Lorolo. What if he were to be killed?" Meya spoke bluntly, because that was the only way.

"Then I should want to die too."

"Nonsense. You know Lorolo will quite likely die. I'm sorry, but I can't change it. Nerogun will not think that mere exile is punishment enough for such a low-born servant."

Janeya began to sob again, and Sina began to remonstrate, but Meya spoke again, more loudly.

"Be quiet, both of you. You know how things are and you know in your hearts that what I say is true. If Nerogun wants him dead then Lorolo cannot be saved. But you, Janeya, can."

"I don't want to be saved!" Janeya burst out. Durba put a restraining hand on her arm and a finger on her trembling lips. Then she cocked her head at Meya in enquiry.

Meya began to explain. They all listened as she unfolded her plan: link after link, putting the chain together. It would require the services of the two maids, Eral and Piril. She explained exactly what they would have to do – and that was where Eral revolted.

"I can't do that, ma'am!" she expostulated. "I can do the rest, I think, but I can't do that!"

"You will have to," Meya told her sternly, "or none of this will work. Piril? You owe the Lady Janeya a great debt. You swore your loyalty to her only hours ago, when you spoke to me about your brother."

She gazed steadily at Piril until the maid nodded. Although her tense face was dismayed, she said, "I will do what you require, ma'am. So long as we don't get into trouble."

"You will not," Meya assured them, although she was by no means entirely sure of that.

"And later on you will have more to do, while all eyes and thoughts are on the Lady Janeya. That is where – perhaps – Durba can help. If you are still willing, Durba?"

The Rider nodded.

"Good. You'll just have to hide in the closet again at the right time." They went through the details of the plan once more. Then Meya said, "You will need to be suitably noisy and distressed, Janeya. In fact, all of you will. Better start now."

As she stood up to leave, Janeya had already set up a wail. Her maid joined in; when Meya walked back through her quarters, opening all the doors between, the cries of grief and mourning followed her. By the time she opened the main door, they were clearly audible to the guards.

"I am going to ask Lord Nerogun that the Lady Janeya should be moved elsewhere," she said authoritatively. "Do not stir until I return. Let no-one in or out."

"Ma'am."

She stalked away and then, once out of sight, almost flew across the courtyard and over to the west wing in search of Nerogun. The lordling Jaul – a conceited, idle upstart, in her opinion – was lounging in the stairwell.

"My Lord Nerogun – where is he?" she demanded.

He replied in a slow drawl. "Up in the yellow room, I believe." The yellow room was where the Post-Regent sometimes retired after his dinner. She did not bother to curtsy but gathered her skirts as she whisked past Jaul.

She ran up the stairs and knocked at the door of the yellow room. A footman answered. Suspecting that he was about to bar her from entering, she whisked past him too, thankful to have found the Post-Regent no matter how annoyed he might be at her unannounced arrival.

Nerogun was seated at a desk with a pile of papers and a frown. She marched forward to confront him.

"My Lord Nerogun. I must speak with you."

"My lady! What brings you here at this hour? Well? What has happened now?" The second question was only asked once the footman, at a dismissive wave, had retreated from the room and closed the door.

"A great deal of bother and hysteria has happened," answered Meya. She found that she was trembling. Well, that didn't matter. Let it be with rage. "The Lady Janeya is – Oh! I have no patience with her. Continually screaming that she wants to be with Lorolo. That she loves him. I've never heard such rubbish! The girl acts as if she is demented."

"She is wicked," said Nerogun, his eyes sharp.

"She is a fool. Worse than that – she is a fool who has laid waste the name of her family and that of Kelvha. I thought that Lorolo had assaulted her. It turns out she invited his advances! She deceived her betters. And when I reprimanded her she turned on *me*." Meya compressed her lips, for her voice was shaking. It was not through fear, she told herself. It was simply the strain.

Luckily Nerogun took it for pure indignation. He shrugged. "You insisted on having her taken to your rooms," he pointed out.

"Well, now I want her out. I can't sleep with her in there. The girl will not be quiet. She is infuriating. Her maid is little better. I want the guards to move them somewhere that I can't hear them wailing. The Tell Tower is empty."

He raised his eyebrows. "You want Janeya moved to the Tell Tower?"

"For tonight only," said Meya firmly. "Any longer would not be fitting for one of her rank. She is still noble, after all. But a night in the Tell Tower might remind her of the fact, and bring her to her senses. I cannot be dealing with her ravings. I have had enough." This last she was able to say with true conviction.

"Very well," said Nerogun, nodding. "I'll send more soldiers to make sure there's no difficulty in moving her."

"My maid can go with her. Hers is next to useless. If Lady Janeya had any sense of – Hah. Well. That's too much to hope for. Things are what they are." She rubbed at her forehead, almost overcome by a sudden sense of exhaustion. "Tomorrow we will decide what can be done with her."

"I will decide," Nerogun corrected her.

Meya opened her mouth as if about to contradict him, closed it again, curtsied with weary dignity and left. She prayed that she had been convincing enough.

And that Janeya could be convincing enough. As she returned to her quarters she could hear the crying from outside in the passage: it sounded genuine.

"Have they not quietened down at all?" she asked one of the guards. He shook his head.

"Well, they will be moved shortly," she told him. "The Lord Post-Regent is sending soldiers down to aid you in escorting them elsewhere. Then perhaps I can get some sleep."

Although she doubted whether she would sleep at all, alone in her silent chamber and wondering what was happening up in the Tell Tower.

The thought rushed into her mind that she could go to Huldarion's room for the night. He would ask no questions. He would make no demands. The idea of simply being held, being reassured by strong male arms around her, was suddenly very attractive.

But no man, no matter how strong and grave, could solve her current problems. Men did not protect women in this place. They thought they did: but they did not. Even her father had not tried to protect her from the rules, the customs, the restrictions. The iron bonds of how and when to speak – or rather, not to speak; how to dress, to walk, to look, to act.

I am acting now, she thought, pretending, as I have done all my life. I pray that I may be successful.

She opened the door to the crying and went in.

## Chapter 30

Nerogun stood at an upper window and watched the girl being dragged across the courtyard by his soldiers towards the Tell Tower. She would not walk and her shoes scraped on the cobbles as she struggled in her captors' grasp. Two downcast maids stumbled after them clutching bundles of clothing. One of the soldiers put his hand across Janeya's mouth to stop her shrieks.

Good, he thought. Give the bitch a slap while you're at it.

But no. He corrected himself at once. That was not for a soldier to do: not to a lady so high-born. When Janeya got her due punishment, it would come from *him*.

He had not yet decided what form that punishment would take. He wanted to make the most of this opportunity to disgrace Janeya's uncle Melegan: what an indolent, useless Keeper of the Keys he had turned out to be! But it could not be rushed. Nothing could be done while the Riders of the Vonn were here.

Nobody could accuse *me* of indolence, he thought as he abandoned his post at the window and proceeded briskly down the stairs. Nobody works harder than me to maintain the power and prestige of Kelvha Castle. Tireless, night and day. Whereas if it were left to nobles like Melegan...

He nodded to Jaul as he passed. "Go now," he said. "I have no more errands." Jaul slouched away. A useful man on occasion, but Nerogun did not like him. He had no time for perverts.

And Jaul had failed to entrap the tall Rider despite his assurances to Nerogun that he could do so. Jaul had been wrong about the Rider, that was all; but would not admit it. He seemed almost obsessed with him. Nerogun shook his head. He might have to get rid of Jaul.

Iajo, now, was much more effective at obtaining the desired results. Whether from prisoners or servants, the Armoury assistant could usually extract any information that was needed in a remarkably short space of time. Of course his methods were violent. Nerogun did not mind that unless it caused excessive noise or mess.

By now Iajo should have got a full confession out of that doe-eyed monster, Lorolo. Nerogun slowed down as he headed to the dungeons: partly because of all those pastries, weighing heavy in his stomach, but also through anticipation. He held back from arriving too soon; meanwhile his skin began to tingle as he thought of the pleasures to come.

When he arrived in the cold passage underneath the armoury, however, the pleasure was somewhat diminished, for Iajo had already done his job too well. A full confession was waiting for him, indeed – the long text Nerogun had prepared signed with Lorolo's weak, shaky scribble – but Iajo had been over-zealous in his extracting of it.

Which meant that not only were the dungeon, and its inhabitant, annoyingly bloody, but Nerogun had missed a great deal of the fun. When he kicked Lorolo to make him roll over on the floor he saw that one of the man's eyes was missing. The socket was black with congealing blood.

He turned to Iajo. "You could have waited."

"I thought you wanted the confession."

"It didn't have to be that speedy. I would have preferred to watch."

"I'll take the other eye out if you want," Iajo offered, but Nerogun shook his head.

"You can leave us for a while," he said. "I'll speak to him now. You can talk to him again later."

Iajo grinned and walked out, leaving red footprints behind him. Nerogun surveyed his quarry, who lay limply twitching, silent but for the occasional faint gasp.

"Get up," he said. Of course the slave couldn't. No strength, no fortitude, no balls; although Iajo had apparently left that area intact. That could be rectified in due course.

He dragged the prone animal to his feet, turned him round, threw him over the stool and pulled down his breeches. He would teach the slave a lesson. A forceful, brutal lesson: that this was what servants were for, that they had no say, that they were subject to his power, that he could do whatever he liked, wherever he liked, as hard as he liked, and no matter how they screamed it would not stop him. In fact he wanted them to scream. The more terrified they were the better.

But Lorolo, after an initial moan of pain, made no sound at all. It was most unsatisfactory. Nerogun had to reach for the bloody eye socket before the man-servant would even struggle. And then he did cry out more loudly: and Nerogun, grunting and twisting his fingers in the socket, held him close with one last brutal thrust and then withdrew.

Rearranging his clothes, he looked down at his victim in disgust, slumped helplessly over the stool. Too much blood and everything else. The dungeon stank. What a pathetic, whimpering excuse for a man.

He went to the door and called Iajo back in. "All yours. Don't kill him yet."

"The other eye?"

"Save it till later," said Nerogun. He picked up the confession and went out.

Not as enjoyable as he had hoped. It was the slave's fault. He should have screamed. They usually did, although sometimes the girls were silent. Of course you could always do it face to face with the girls and see their terror. But treat a low-born worm as he deserves.

"He got what was his due," he said aloud, although there was nobody to hear him but the stone walls of the castle. "He asked for it."

What he himself had just done was entirely justified. Although Nerogun was dimly aware that in the early days he hadn't required quite so much pain to give him pleasure, he did not dwell on the thought. This was his right. It proved his power. It was a necessary part of the job, to show the slaves their place.

Still unsatisfactory, though. Perhaps the girl...? He thought with a tremor of excitement of what he could do to Janeya, up in the Tell Tower where nobody could hear. But he would have to get rid of the maids first, and the guards outside the tower door; and as for Janeya herself—

A wild, disobedient, self-willed woman. She too deserved it. But with one so high-born the risks were too great. He needed her alive and unhurt, to parade as an object of disgust before the relatives; with no tales that she could recount beyond those of her own crimes. He had learned his lesson there.

Let her stay up in the tower for now, he thought. As Meya had said, the experience might just sober her. If anything could. No better than a bitch in heat, that will offer itself to the first mongrel that it sees, without any shame...

And then his mind turned to Meya, with some dislike. Mrs Propriety: an upright woman, but too forceful. She assumed too much responsibility. Although he did not doubt her sense of duty to the castle, he would be glad when she was gone.

He had thought it a strange choice by Huldarion, but in retrospect, given Janeya's appalling behaviour, it had been a safe one. Even the childish princess Idria had started making eyes at the young Riders. However, she would easily be kept in check. At least the stately Meya would never go running around the castle on secret assignments. The thought of Meya running at all made him chuckle in amused contempt as he unlocked his door.

Not a bad day, all things considered: and Lorolo would still be there tomorrow, waiting for him in the dungeon. Once back in his own rooms, Nerogun spent a little time imagining what he might do about that other eye. Or other parts. So many possibilities.

Then he washed and did some paperwork – there was always paperwork – before taking to his bed for a few hours' sleep. He prided himself on how little sleep he needed, for he was tireless on his country's behalf, and generally awoke before the dawn even in these days of early summer.

Tonight he got less sleep than usual, for the busy activity of his thoughts kept him awake. Those Vonn: perhaps it would be best to hasten their departure from the city. They could meet up with the returning scouts en route. He himself would follow later, from a safer distance, for he had no wish to get involved in battle personally.

The Vonn, however, would need little urging. They were battle-hungry. Jeveran would do the business for them: the man was very capable. In fact his capability made him a man to keep an eye on: perhaps even to beware of...

Still, any unseemly aspirations could be dealt with later on, if necessary, after Caervonn had been won. And it would be won. Then Kelvha – so great and powerful an ally – would eventually rule Caervonn in all but name. Nerogun allowed himself a smile in the dark.

Adonil had bid him wait a while longer, but it would not do for him to bow too often to Adonil's wishes. The wizard had been useful, but how far could he be trusted? There was no reading that unnaturally youthful face. Without the golden mask it was as bland, unmarked and tranquil as the mask itself.

As for Adonil's idea of maligning Huldarion, that would never work. The low-life temple-going rabble that Adonil said might be persuaded to rise up in Huldarion's name would be too easily put down again to cause any more than temporary annoyance. And in any case Nerogun did not want Huldarion stigmatized just yet; not until Caervonn was conquered.

So meanwhile he would obey Adonil only when it suited him. Adonil was not his master. Nerogun had no interest in the wizard's grudge against his fellow-wizard Leor, which seemed to occupy him so much. It would be politic, he thought, to keep both wizards on his side for now. After all, it was Leor who had supplied him with the darkburn.

And Nerogun had plans for that too. He smiled again, remembering how the stonemen had shrieked on being thrown into the darkburn's cell beneath the northern wall. Their agony had been all too brief. But it had been extreme. Most satisfactory.

Then, at last, he slept.

## Chapter 31

But not for long. He was awoken, not as normal by his own internal clock, but by a hammering at his door.

"My lord! My lord Nerogun! You are needed!"

For once, in his drowsiness, he was slow to react. Pulling on his dressing gown, he noted that the first grey morning light had turned his room to seeming stone. He himself felt like a stone inhabitant within its walls, unable to either think or move swiftly. He could not imagine what the matter was and tried to stir his mind into action as he opened the door.

"What is it? I warn you, it had better be worth all the rumpus." But even as he spoke Nerogun realised that there was another rumpus – raised voices, crying – going on somewhere further away.

"My lord, you are needed – at the bottom of the Tell Tower..."

But now he was already hastening down the stairs, gravity making up for his stiffness so effectively that he almost fell down the last few steps. Recovering, he pushed impatiently past a gaggle of servants who scattered in alarm at his approach.

The guard was running after him. "My Lord, some workmen found her, when they set out for their morning tasks... She was lying in the courtyard underneath the tower."

"Who was? They found who?" he snapped.

"My lord, it looks – it looks like – I am told it is the Lady Janeya. It seems as if she..."

The guard did not finish. Nerogun turned and glared at him.

"Jumped? Or was thrown? Don't be so squeamish, man." But he did not wait for a reply before striding off again.

In the courtyard below the Tell Tower another small crowd parted mutely at his approach. He felt his fury rising for these events that were out of his control. If anyone leapt from the Tell Tower it should be at his bidding. What were these onlookers doing here, so early? Even a small crowd was too many.

"Get out of there," he yelled in anger, before he realised that one of the women standing in the courtyard was his daughter Gaelera. A thrill of alarm went through him although there was no particular reason why this should be so; for Gaelera was not easily upset.

"Gaelera," he said. "My lady. This is no place for you."

She made no reply. He looked down at the thing in the servants' midst.

On the cobbles lay an untidy heap of clothes and hair and blood. Even from here he could see that the face had been all but obliterated in the long fall past the rough stones of the Tell Tower. But he recognised the dress: last seen being ripped, as Janeya was man-handled across the pavement by a soldier. The carefully dressed hair, now bloodied and awry, yet with a jewelled hairpin still in place. And those silk shoes.

Two more soldiers appeared now, dragging a pair of maid-servants. He recognised one of them as Janeya's maid: the girl he had spoken to about the strumpet's assignments with that slave. He remembered that he had threatened the maid with her worthless brother. Now he walked over and slapped her in the face as he would have liked to have slapped Janeya.

"What crime is this? What have you done?"

The maid was very pale but spoke clearly and without hesitation. "I didn't even know the lady had jumped out, sir, until the guards came bursting in just now. It took us so long to quiet her last night that once she slept we were exhausted. I thought she was asleep all night. She made no sound. She must have risen silently and opened the window..."

He slapped her again. "Or else you got annoyed with her crying and pushed her out, did you?"

"No, sir. You know I speak you true."

"Hmph." He reflected that indeed the girl had done his bidding in the past. And she had nothing to gain by murdering her mistress, but much to lose.

"Eral? What has happened?" That was the Lady Meya, panting as she hurried over to the awe-struck huddle of people underneath the tower. Nerogun was exasperated. Why were all these women here?

"Oh, my lady," said the second maid, bobbing to Meya, her face pulling out of shape. "Oh, ma'am, I'm so sorry. We thought the Lady Janeya had calmed down – she stopped crying and said she'd try to rest – but then – oh, ma'am – she must have gone to the window while we slept."

"Janeya?" The Lady Meya was very pale as she walked slowly over to the corpse sprawled underneath the tower. "Let me see."

Nerogun was suddenly suspicious. How was it she had turned up here so quickly? But just as he was about to demand an explanation, his daughter put a hand out to halt Meya in mid-step. And it occurred to him that if Meya had been there swiftly, his daughter had been even swifter. As Meya herself might well point out.

"Wait," said Gaelera, with her usual deliberation. When she spoke, everyone was still. "Stay there, my lady. I will look."

And with a careful rearrangement of her embroidered dress – she was fully dressed, which was a little strange, for Meya was, like himself, in a dressing gown – Gaelera stepped forward, knelt at the body's side and with fastidious fingers removed the strands of bloodied hair from the face.

Everyone waited in silence while she examined the distorted features. The face must have hit the stonework full on, Nerogun thought.

Then after a long moment Gaelera said, "Yes, it is Janeya. A momentary madness, I expect." She stood up, wiping her fingers carefully on a handkerchief. "I know that she had not been well. I believe that she had been distressed lately. Is it not so, my Lady Meya?"

"I believe so," Meya answered in a murmur. Her voice shook a little: she was pale around the lips. Nerogun discounted any knowledge on her part. Even though she might have hounded the girl into this rash deed, Meya had clearly not expected it. That shocked reaction to his daughter's words could not have been feigned.

"Such weakness of mind runs in Janeya's family, I understand," said Gaelera calmly. She held out her hand and dropped her bloodied handkerchief on to the corpse. "Am I not right in that, father?"

And suddenly he saw an opening. His daughter had given him a new way to discredit Janeya's idle, useless uncle, Melegan.

"You are right," he said. With those words, he was back in control. Throwing back his shoulders, he addressed the guards. "Have the Lady Janeya's body removed to her own quarters. Spread no tittle-tattle. If I hear of any gossip about this, it will mean dismissal and far worse. Do you understand me?"

The guards saluted. But when Nerogun turned to admonish the two chamber-maids, Meya was already ushering them away. She had begun to scold them furiously for leaving Janeya unattended, so he let them go for now. He could deal with them later.

His mind was busy with more important things. Despite his admonition to the guards, news of this death could not be kept quiet for long; it would soon sweep through the castle, he foresaw, and cause some unavoidable scandal.



In fact, he himself would probably come under suspicion of hastening Janeya's death by some means or other. He did not fear the tongues of foolish men, but stilling them would take time. Although he could set to work maligning Janeya's family – especially Melegan – that could not be achieved overnight. It must be gradual. Seeds had to be sewn and doubts to grow.

A distraction was needed. Something to push Janeya out of people's minds.

Perhaps it was time to try the experiment with the captive darkburn...

He became aware that Gaelera was watching him, expressionless. Once the soldiers had carried away Janeya's corpse, she said,

"Did you visit Janeya in the tower last night, father?" Her tone was one of mild enquiry.

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Of course I didn't."

"I only ask because such things have been known."

A sudden apprehension crawled over him like a spider. He did not answer.

He would have willingly forgotten; but Gaelera would not allow him to forget.

Her behaviour was impeccable. He could find no fault with her. She had never repeated those words said seven years ago. *If I am found dead, father, everyone will know exactly what you did. I have made arrangements.*

He had not been able to discover what those arrangements were; and she had never spoken of them since. She had become a thing apart from him, watching from a distance.

She did not oppose him. Sometimes she was, in her strange way, helpful. A weakness of mind in Janeya's family... yes, he could work with that.

But although he did not fear men's tongues, yet he feared his daughter. And now, beneath Gaelera's cold unmoving gaze, he wondered just what she was doing here at the bottom of the Tell Tower, in her heavy, stiff, embroidered dress.

## Chapter 32

Rothir would have much preferred to be on horseback. It wasn't just because the silver tide of dizziness swept through him every now and then, making him uncertain of his footing, for that was, he judged and hoped, happening less and less; but he missed Narba. Every day he visited his great-hearted horse in the nearby stables, stroking Narba's glossy head and telling him that soon they would be riding out to battle. His usually patient horse was restless: the one gallop that he and Rothir had taken outside the city walls had been all too brief.

And now Rothir was outside the walls again, but regrettably on foot. When he had asked Veron where they were going, he had received no answer. Veron had simply handed him the dark cloak and fur hood of a hunter, and told him to put them on. And to walk with him.

So here they were, tramping through the early evening warmth around the western wall, where all the sun's late heat seemed to concentrate and gather; strolling amongst the grimy tradesmen and dusty farmhands, who appeared to be all glowing in the setting sun's last rays until the final sliver of the sun was hidden and they fell abruptly from glory into gloom.

A disreputable foursome he and his companions must appear, no doubt, especially in the growing dusk. Veron and his two shaggy hunters had an air that made men steer out of their path. Rothir suspected that he himself looked little friendlier, even though the cloak hid his sword and leather armour. Veron had bid him put them on and keep them covered with his cloak. Rothir had no idea why.

Armour meant fighting. Yet as they paced around the walls towards the northern gate, Veron still said no word.

Why have I put myself at his command? thought Rothir. Because Huldarion is not around to tell me yea or nay. And because we two now seem to be – in Veron's eyes at least – blood brothers. Perhaps in my eyes too. The huntress has laid her lethal claws upon us both... And we have both survived, if changed. At any rate, I do not wish to let him down.

But he wished Veron would tell him the nature of their errand. Once or twice Veron halted and glanced back sharply, as if to satisfy himself that they were not being followed. When at last he spoke, as they trudged along, it was only to say,

"All well in your lodgings?"

"Seems to be." Rothir decided not to mention how he had walked into Theol's room early that morning, hoping to borrow a razor, and had found his second-in-command in bed with Tiburé. The pair had been more amused than embarrassed. Rothir had been the most disconcerted of the three as he backed out of the room, apologising. Theol! But he had always had a reputation as a ladies' man. And Tiburé! Well, Solon showed no affection for his wife these days...

"All well in the castle?" asked Veron.

"So far as I know. Parthenal said there seemed to be some sort of kerfuffle there today. Servants running round with anxious faces. He couldn't gather what any of it was about, though."

"Ah."

"Some mystery or other," mused Rothir. Parthenal had said that after enquiring in vain of one or two scared servants, he had seen the archivist Tamu scurrying down a corridor; so he had stopped him to ask if there was something going on. The archivist had blinked at him wordlessly for a moment before he said, "Only the usual." Whatever *that* meant. Parthenal was none the wiser.

“Nerogun? What was his reaction to the excitement?” asked Veron now.

“How would I know? I’m not privy to the High Lords’ doings. And I’m not even sure that excitement was the right word. Some mishap or accident, Parthenal thought.”

“Something that’s bad enough to make Nerogun act,” said Veron.

“Act how?”

“Wait.”

“Wait?” repeated Rothir, mildly exasperated; for Veron certainly wasn’t waiting. He was striding on at a brisk pace. They were not far from the northern gate now – he recognised the stalls against the wall as if from some past dream or other life. Of course, he hadn’t been quite well when he last rode up here. He had been bizarrely cheerful that day, he recalled. But he was almost fully himself now. Just occasionally he would feel the slow echo of a silver ripple run across his skull like mercury.

And now at last, before they reached the gate, Veron slowed down.

“I know this place,” said Rothir. “It’s the blacksmith’s forge.” He remembered that contented other time, his pleasure on entering the low, dark building: the roaring comfort of the furnace, the impressive halberds on the wall. And good arrowheads. She had liked them. So he had got that right.

Yaret’s happiness seemed to be important to him. Having saved her life, he needed to know it would be an easy and secure one... Though that was hardly possible given the destruction of her town. Arrowheads could not make up for all her losses. Nothing could.

She put a brave face on it, thought Rothir, but in truth he knew he could not tell what she was thinking. She was more remote to him now than she had been in those first days of their acquaintance, on the Darkburn Loft. Her face, so open then, so easy to read, seemed to have closed somehow. Apart from that dreadful evening in the Fort beside the dying man, when all her grief and anger were made plain.

So much had happened since they first met on the Loft. Too much... He remembered riding through Farwithiel with her held up in the saddle in front of him, slumping against him, the bandage on her stump still oozing blood. A dreadful memory. Yet a dear one. Hard to say why. He ought not to want to remember anything so gruesome.

“This is where we wait,” said Veron. He cast one final sweeping glance around before he entered the smithy.

The hunters followed him in, and Rothir followed the hunters. The furnace was a sulky red, its embers already banked up and covered for the night. The smith was tidying away his tools. When they entered he looked up and nodded as if expecting them.

“Martun,” said Rothir, recalling the smith’s name. He didn’t recall that the man had only had one ear. However, the place itself seemed totally familiar to him, warm and welcoming; almost a home.

“Welcome, Rothir. Please be seated.” Martun gestured to a bench. When he sat it was uncomfortable: too low.

“I have no idea why I’m here,” he said, and the smith looked questioningly at Veron.

“I haven’t told him yet,” said Veron. “All right. Rothir. You are here because we need your skills.”

“My skills at what? Not blacksmithing, surely?” He looked around the place, wishing for a moment that this indeed was his profession. That he had this as his working home, a life to spend in making solid, useful things.

“Your skills at killing,” said Veron. “Specifically, at killing darkburns.” He over-rode Rothir’s shocked exclamation and went on, “I can kill well enough, when it’s stonemen.

But not darkburns. I'd never met any loose ones until the battle of the Outland Forts. And none came near me then. I haven't your experience. This one needs to be killed fast, and quietly."

"Which darkburn?" demanded Rothir. He was aware he sounded fierce. "You mean the thing imprisoned underneath the city walls? Or have you got some other darkburn hidden up your sleeve?"

The two hunters with them grinned. One of them shook his sleeve and said something in his own language. Veron raised his hand slightly, at which they both immediately dropped the smiles from their faces and were still.

"The one trapped in the bath-house, underneath the walls," Veron said curtly. "We've had word. Nerogun has put out his orders. That darkburn is to be let loose in the city, soon after midnight."

"What?" Rothir sprang up from his hard seat. "They'll free the darkburn? Is Nerogun mad? It'll burn the place down! There'll be havoc! Why on earth would he do such a thing?"

"He's never met a darkburn," one of the hunters commented. "Probably doesn't know what it can do."

"Oh, he knows," said Veron. "He's been practising on prisoners. Captive stonemen."

"Then shame on him," said Rothir roughly.

A darkburn in the city, with its closely-packed, overhanging buildings? In his imagination he saw the buds of yellow heat, the rapidly growing petals of red flame, the golden flower turning to a raging monster with choking tendrils made of smoke. Overwhelming buildings; destroying neighbourhoods.

Obandiro, but on a massive scale, he thought. She must not see it. "Why would he want to do that to the city?" he demanded.

"Oh, only the poor parts," said Veron. "Nerogun doesn't care about the northern quarter. But my guess is that he wants a distraction from whatever happened in the castle lately. He wants people to look the other way."

"They'll do that all right," growled Rothir. "They'll be distracted for about ten seconds, before they start burning up. How is he going to stop the fire from spreading?"

"The city's mostly built of brick and stone," Veron pointed out. "It's only the northern quarter's that's chiefly made of wood. The other parts won't burn so easily. And his soldiers have plenty of stones prised from the stonemen's heads. Nerogun probably thinks that's enough to control the darkburn when he needs to."

"Those stones might control the darkburn. They won't control the fire."

"Nerogun may be badly advised," said Veron.

"Shargun's told him the darkburns were easily defeated on the battlefield," the blacksmith put in. "The man's a charlatan. Shargun, I mean."

Rothir looked over at him in surprise.

"Martun is a relative of Arch-Lord Marshal Shargun," said Veron, cocking his head at the blacksmith. "Doesn't like him much. Doesn't like the way things are going. That's why he told us about this plan. And that's why he's helping us."

"Is he? How does he know all this?" Rothir demanded.

"My cousin," said Martun, with an edge to his voice. "My esteemed cousin has Shargun's ear – and he likes to make sure that people know it. He told me this morning about the plan to free the darkburn."

"Is it likely to be true?"

"As likely as not."

"And how can you help us?" Rothir asked him.

"We can get to the darkburn from this side of the wall. There's an outlet to the bathhouse between here and the North Gate. The way in is through a large grid – locked; but I've got a set of keys." Picking up two long iron keys from his worktop, the blacksmith passed them over to Veron.

"Where did you get those?" asked Rothir in surprise.

"Long story," said Veron, "but it means we can enter through the grid and destroy the darkburn before it can be let loose in the streets."

Rothir considered this plan. "Maybe. It won't be that easy, surely? There must be another barrier in there, or otherwise the darkburn would be constantly hurling itself against the grid," he pointed out.

"There is a second gate. But it doesn't require keys. I've been in there to check. Nearly burnt my hair off," said Veron casually.

Rothir stared at him. "What about the guards? They'll discover us, won't they?"

"The guards are only on the inner side of the wall. They stay as far from the darkburn as they can. They use the stones to drive it down this end. And in a little while, when it's almost dark, they'll be changing over. That will be our best chance to get in."

"But how will you know when the guards are changing?"

Veron grinned. "Got a spy on the other side of the wall. He'll give the signal. Can you do it?"

"Kill the darkburn? Yes," said Rothir soberly. Although he did not relish the prospect, he knew he could destroy one captive darkburn, especially with Veron as back-up. "If I have to."

"You have to," said Veron.

"No, Rothir. You don't have to."

That was not the smith's voice. Nor did it come from any of the hunters. It was a lighter tone, and totally unexpected. When Rothir spun round, to his bewilderment he saw Yaret strolling into the smithy, as if she had arrived there by some casual chance.

Veron's grin disappeared as he stared at her. "What in stars' name are you doing here?" he snapped, echoing Rothir's shock.

"I followed you," said Yaret.

Veron frowned in disbelief. "What? How? I thought I felt somebody. But I didn't see you!"

"Good. I've been following you for the last two days, while you stalk other people, just to work out how you did it. So congratulate yourself on your fine example." Yaret looked over at the blacksmith. "Well, Martun; I suppose you must have found my impressions of the locks."

"You what?" said Rothir. "You made impressions of the locks?" He was aware that his voice had become a surly growl. But he did not save Yaret for this, he thought, so that she could walk straight into danger.

He found he was upset and knew it was unreasonable; the saving of her life gave him no rights over her. All the same he felt deeply disturbed. He had hoped somehow that she could be free of the darkburns and their destructiveness. But here she was.

"It was Edrik who retrieved your impressions from their rather inadequate hiding-place, when he followed you that day," said Veron. He was still frowning. "And don't think that you can interfere with our plans to kill the darkburn. Would you rather see it set loose upon the city?"

"No," said Yaret. "But you don't have to kill it, surely? Just keep it safe." She turned to address Martun. "Couldn't you devise some sort of cage or iron shackle that would hold the darkburn somewhere else in safety?"

"Perhaps I could; but that would take too long," the smith replied. "Why are you so concerned about the darkburn? It's just a weapon, isn't it? An artefact made out of burning coal, or some such fuel, by all accounts. It's not alive."

"Yaret, I don't understand you," said Rothir gravely. "Why would you try to cage the darkburn? Surely you don't mean that we should use it as a weapon of war ourselves?"

She shook her head decisively. "No, stars forbid. But it's not just an artefact made out of coal. It's not made out of any ordinary matter. It is altogether an extraordinary creature." She hesitated. "And I think – I think it's trying to tell us something."

Veron laughed.

"It's telling us to die," said Rothir forcefully. He could not comprehend her attitude.

"Darkburns wiped out your whole town, Yaret!"

"Do you think I'm in any danger of forgetting that?"

"No, of course not; but–"

"I've felt that I was almost communicating with this particular darkburn on three occasions now. I'd like one more chance, at least."

"*Almost* communicating," said Veron drily.

"Yes. Nearly there."

Veron shrugged. "Very well, then. If time allows, you can have a few minutes near it while we wait for our signal. But we can't go near the grid until it's getting dark."

"It's getting dark now."

"Not dark enough. Sit down."

She sat. Rothir stood in contemplation, gazing at the dimly glowing forge. Inwardly he was rehearsing how to tackle the darkburn; remembering the onslaught of its heat and horror, mentally going through the moves, the hazards. He nodded to himself.

"Do you have helmet linings?" he asked Martun.

"Woollen quilted." The blacksmith pulled out a box from underneath the bench and held one up.

"Then I'll borrow a helmet off you, if I may," he said, and Martun picked three helmets off their hooks for him to choose from. As Rothir tried them on they made desultory conversation about the beating out of headgear, although he did not feel much like talking, even about blacksmithing.

Yaret was silent on the hard bench. After a few moments one of the hunters – not the grizzled Edrik, but the younger, shaggier Narduk – sat down next to her.

"You talked with it how?" he asked.

"I sang."

Narduk nodded thoughtfully. He did not laugh or scoff as Rothir would have expected. Indeed, both hunters seemed to treat Yaret with some respect.

It's because she met the huntress, said Rothir to himself. More than that: she petitioned her. Veron said they seemed to know each other. We are all five of us here beholden to the huntress...

The wave of mercury crossed through his head again in a slow surge from temple to temple, a liquid flow of moonlight. It made him dizzy for a moment.

He shook his head to dispel it. Veron announced that it was time to go. Bidding Rothir don his leather gauntlets, he took a second pair from Martun which he donned himself. Martun watched them leave, standing by his doorway as the five of them stepped silently out into the twilight.

Dusk lay heavy around the north wall, making strange shapes of the landscape, as unnerving as the presence of a band of concealed predators. All was quiet as the group approached the iron grid. Beyond it, the northern gate had been closed for the night: they heard the thump of the great stave being slung across its doors to latch it.

At the grid they stopped, all but invisible, Rothir hoped, in their dark cloaks. There was no-one near to challenge them. A chill wind blew across the empty fields, swirling underneath the walls. But the air that reached them from the grid was warm – even hot – and stinking. A familiar stink that brought back the noise and chaos of the battlefield in a hurtling rush.

“Now’s your chance,” said Veron to Yaret. “You communicate away.”

She leant back against the warm grid with her eyes closed. Rothir could feel the darkburn’s aura through the stone: the horror, grief, the hate and anger, dread. It could never be forgotten but familiarity and practice made it easier to bear. Telling himself the aura would not last once the thing was killed, he braced himself against it now.

Veron stood by him with the keys: the two huntsmen moved further away. He suspected they were glad to stand on guard at an easier distance from the darkburn aura.

Yaret’s lips were moving slightly and her shadowed face was tense, although she made no sound. If anything was happened between her and the captive darkburn he could discern no sign of it. Nothing happened for a few long minutes, until with a sudden scream a hawk flew up above the wall from the far side. Rothir assumed it was a hawk, at least: it was hard to tell as it flapped away and seemed to be swallowed by the dark.

“That’s our signal,” said Veron. He took the two long iron keys from his pocket and gave one to Rothir. “You stop now,” he told Yaret. Before she even had a chance to answer, he pulled her away roughly from the grid. Then he applied his key to the lower keyhole, indicating to Rothir that he should unlock the higher one.

Rothir inserted his key. It was well-oiled and slid round with only minimal resistance. As Veron pulled on the grid it swung slowly outward on its hinges. Those too must have been oiled for they were almost soundless.

Beyond the grid was only shadow. Veron entered and Rothir followed, feeling for the wall beside him, warm and damp. Although they moved stealthily he caught a breath of echo, as if they were inside a tunnel. A few steps further in, the darkness was complete, and the darkburn stink was strong – burnt flesh mingled with decay. It made his gorge rise.

Now Veron produced a small lamp which Rothir eyed suspiciously, for it burnt with no visible flame, but produced a mild orange glow. But it was just enough for him to see by. They were in a short passage, about four yards long, with another grid at its far end. Behind the grid was something indistinct in the thin orange lamplight.

As they approached, it became no more distinct. If anything, it grew more blurred. The heat became intense: and so did the terror and the rage.

The darkburn. The feelings it generated were monstrous in their power, out of all proportion to its size. It commanded death. It urged self-destruction. It filled his head with desolation. He beat the feelings down.

This new grid was fastened with a long iron bar. Before they lifted it, Veron drew his sword and motioned to Rothir to do the same. He could tell that Veron found even lifting the sword difficult. But he himself was used to the required effort now.

Each taking one end of the bar in gauntleted hands, they raised it from its latches. At once the heavy grid fell out towards them so that Rothir had to jump back quickly. The grid thudded onto the earthen floor: surely the soldiers on the other side might hear? But there was no time for him to worry about that, because the darkburn was already on him.

It was a whirl of burning blackness, of soot and charcoal, yet as hard as rock against the blade. It had almost got inside his guard before he slashed his sword at it. Immediately he had to jump back again, one sleeve smoking, his arms already burning, his shoulder hitting the side of the tunnel. There was little room to wield his sword: as he struck the darkburn a second and a third time, his blade clashed on the stone wall and set off a shower of sparks.

More noise. It was impossible to do this quietly. And although he held the darkburn off, it did not fall. He struck at it again, a lateral blow using all his strength, and then had to leap back from the heat. The darkburn halted only for an instant before it rushed at him once more.

He slashed in a down diagonal followed by a sidesweep; and then Veron joined in, stabbing the thing, although Rothir could have told him that stabbing did not work. It needed the lateral slash. He swept his sword at the dark mass, and this time a piece of it flew off.

"Draw it out," said Veron breathlessly, himself backing away. Rothir followed him, slashing almost continuously at the darkburn now as he backed down the tunnel towards the outer side. He had never fought a darkburn in such a confined space and the heat was overwhelming him. Even with the visor down, his face was burning, and his upper arms and legs were too where the leather armour did not cover him.

Now bits of charcoal flew off the darkburn, hitting him like scorching hail; yet still it rushed at him. It was trying to leap on him and devour him in flame as it had struck down Gordal on the battlefield. Not the same darkburn, of course.

Yet as he smote again it seemed to him that they were all one darkburn, all one foe, all part of the same thing. The silver wave began to run from the back of his head to the front, filling up his vision. For a second he was blind, incapable. He did not know where to aim his sword. He was caught and helpless in that slow inexorable tide...

But someone else was suddenly there in front of him, slashing and hacking: when he blinked and strained to see, he realised that it was Yaret.

"Not too close," he tried to say. She probably didn't hear. In any case, she was managing to hold the darkburn off. Although she needed both hands on her hilt, she wielded her sword effectively enough to keep the thing at bay.

As the cool air reached Rothir he recovered both his senses and his strength. He could see the darkburn now: he swung his sword in a hefty cross-sweep, and at last the rushing force of heat and smoke seemed to lose its impetus. His blade hit a substance as brittle-hard as coal. But not coal. Nothing that he could identify. Never mind, the thing had fallen now. Time to finish the job off.

Standing on the grass in the near-dark, he and Yaret hacked in turns at the smoking remnants. Rothir was still chopping at it in disgust and fury – partly disgust at his own momentary weakness – when Veron caught at his arm.

"Enough," he said. "It's done."

Rothir paused, panting. The charcoaled pieces lay motionless and scattered on the ground. The darkburn aura was already fading fast: that more than anything convinced him that the thing was dead.

And Yaret, having claimed to want to talk to it, had helped him to destroy it. He looked over at her.

"I take it your attempt at communication didn't work," he said roughly.

"It worked," said Yaret in a low voice, staring at the remnants of the darkburn. "It worked, after a fashion."

"So what did the thing say?"



"Nothing in words. Just impressions: feelings."

"The darkburn dread. As always."

"Yes. The dread and grief and horror, all of that. But one impression over-riding everything. Almost like a plea."

"A plea? A plea for what?" said Rothir.

She bent to wipe her sword along the grass – unnecessarily, he thought, for darkburns shed no blood – and then sheathed it with slow care before she answered.

"It was: *Kill me. Kill me. Kill me.*"

### *Chapter 33*

There was no time for him to challenge her just now. Edrik and Narduk had already closed the outer grid in the wall and were turning the keys in the locks. Despite the noise of the sword-strokes that seemed still to ring and clang in Rothir's ears, no guards came charging down the tunnel on the other side.

Why not? Where were the guards? Rothir thought that the destruction of the darkburn had probably been achieved in a much briefer time than it had felt like – no more than two or three minutes in all; yet that was surely long enough to have brought the Kelvhan soldiers running.

He turned from Yaret to address Veron. "How long would the changing of the guards take?"

"Longer than usual. They will have had distractions," the hunter answered calmly. Too calmly.

"What distractions? We need to leave," said Rothir.

"In a minute," said Veron. And now Martun strode over in his leather apron, carrying a shovel. With it he began to scoop up the smoking pieces of the darkburn and drop them in a metal pail. Rothir wanted to laugh. Such a potent, terrifying enemy, and the smith was treating it like bits of clinker to be tidily swept up.

As soon as Martun had gathered all the larger pieces, Veron said, "That'll do. Leave the rest; they're too small for anyone to notice." Even so Yaret bent down to pick up more fragments in her gloved hand and drop them in the bucket. In the increasing shadows Rothir could not see her face.

Then they left, hurrying back to the smithy along the dark bulk of the wall; Rothir trying to move as silently as the hunters, pulling off his gauntlets and the over-heated helmet as he ran. Martun came last, carrying the bucket into the smithy. It did not seem to be too heavy considering the horror of its load.

"Uncover the fire," said Martun. When Rothir obeyed, the smith up-ended the pail into the glowing embers. The flames leapt up around the charred remains, and the forge's heat was abruptly doubled: trebled.

Rothir clenched his fist upon his sword hilt, watching the grasping flames. But there was no revival of the darkburn. It was truly destroyed. After a moment, the fire settled, and he relaxed his grip. Walking to the bench, he began to unstrap the leather armour, inspecting the burns on his upper arms and lower legs.

"That looks bad," said Yaret.

"It's not too bad. No blistering," he said. "I'll live."

"A messy job," said Veron, "but good enough."

"It's always messy," he replied.

With a sigh Yaret turned round to gaze at the flames which flickered silver-gold, like praying hands, around the remnants of the darkburn. She murmured something in her own language; and he recalled a rabbit tumbling on the high breezy Darkburn Loft with her arrow in its chest. Some words had been spoken for that too.

The two hunters were also watching Yaret. When Narduk put a question to her in the Ioben tongue, she did not answer until she had finished her incantation.

Then she said in Standard, "Yes, of course it deserves it. Like every living thing you kill."

"But a darkburn is not living," said Narduk, almost cautiously.

"Then how can it have died?" she countered.

"Well, anyway," said Narduk, "it does not deserve a prayer, because it wishes only harm on us. I felt it telling me to plunge a knife into my heart." He thumped a fist into his chest to illustrate his words.

Yaret shook her head. "The darkburn didn't want you to kill yourself," she said firmly. "It wanted you to destroy it." Determined and defiant, she looked over at Rothir. "That's why the darkburns rush on people, full of such dreadful feelings, urging death. The feelings we experience are theirs. They do want death – but their own. They want to be destroyed."

Rothir frowned, unwilling to accept such a complete reversion of his view, but unable to refute it either. Although he thought that she was wrong he could not prove it either way. It was Veron who answered.

"No creature seeks its own death."

"These do."

"Why would they?" Veron demanded.

"Because they are suffering," said Yaret emphatically. Rothir realised that she really believed this although he did not see how she could be so sure. "The grief and horror that we feel – it's the darkburns' grief and horror at their own plight. The urge to die is not a command to us to kill ourselves: it's actually their own despair."

Veron looked at her searchingly. "Why would you say that? These things burn us up! If they wished to die they could find better ways of doing it than by leaping on men and reducing them to ashes."

"But men can kill darkburns. I think they must know that. Where there are no men, they have tried other ways," she said. "Some have tried to drown themselves."

"Where?"

"In the marshes north of the Darkburn forest."

"That sounds unlikely," commented Veron.

"Yet I have seen that too," said Rothir slowly. "I saw the darkburns in the pools, though I assumed that they had fallen in. If it was deliberate – a kind of suicide – it did not work. Or only very slowly." He remembered the sodden object that he had presumed was a twisted log when he pulled it from the water: until it had begun to steam and writhe beneath his hand. Yaret had almost wept at the sight and he had been exasperated. So why was he not exasperated now?

Because he had known Yaret a great deal longer now, he thought: she did not weep without good reason. Again, he remembered her tears in the infirmary fort, up in the bleak northern wastes. Such grief had seemed unwise to him; yet it had been justified.

All the same, her judgement might at present be at fault. She might allow her pity to delude her.

Now she turned to him in appeal. "Rothir, up by the Thore, do you remember the darkburn there? When the stonemen attacked us on the cliffs, the darkburn threw itself straight over the edge."

Remember? How could he forget? That sheer, appalling drop: the roaring of the river far below. They were always lurking somewhere in his mind. "Because we dodged out of the way," he said. "It ran at us and missed, and fell to its death."

She shook her head stubbornly. "It threw itself over."

Rothir was about to argue that that wasn't how his memory of that moment went. But what exactly was his memory? He retrieved it now, unwillingly – for it was a most unwelcome memory – and looked at it.

He saw the indistinct shape spin towards him: recalled the sudden wave of heat as the darkburn hurled itself across the stone platform. He had held his sword out ready, but had he stepped aside? He did not know. The moment had been blurred out by the far greater horror, seconds later, of seeing Yaret being kicked over the cliff edge and disappearing...

That memory caught in his throat. He heard the rush of waters: nothing else. He turned his head away for a moment, studying the spear-heads on the wall, telling himself it didn't matter now, because Yaret was fine. She was here and almost whole.

So turning back to her he said harshly, "It makes no difference, does it? Whether the darkburn wants to destroy us or wants to die, the result is the same. We have to kill it or be killed."

"We do," said Veron.

"Kill them all," said Narduk. "That's what I say. Kill all the stonemen too."

Veron eyed Yaret with his narrow gaze. "I presume you have no similar theories about the stonemen and their intentions?"

"I know nothing about the stonemen," said Yaret. "I wish I did."

"Why?" Veron, too, spoke harshly. "We don't need to know any more about them except that they are our enemies. They have waged war on the Vonn, quite unprovoked."

"Oh, I expect somebody provoked them," Yaret said.

"Are we finished here now?" demanded Rothir. "Can we go? We've got rid of the evidence."

"All is clear," reported Edrik, who had been keeping watch at the door.

Veron walked over to join him. "What about that sentry on the wall?"

"He's only just appeared."

"Then we'll wait until he disappears," said Veron scathingly.

Edrik looked shame-faced. Perhaps it was to draw attention away from him that Yaret walked over to fingered the swords hanging on one side of the forge.

"Martun," she said, "do you have any cheap swords for sale?"

"I have plenty of swords, as you can see. None are cheap," Martun replied with the glimmer of a smile.

"I've got a spare sword," Rothir said, but Yaret shook her head.

"Yours will be too long. I need them smaller."

"I have these." Martun opened an oak chest and from it produced a pair of short, plain swords. "They're really for boys in training. Lightweight, blunt. But I can sharpen them up."

Yaret took one and weighed it in her hand. "How much?"

"Fifteen drebs."

"Each? Including scabbards? All right, I'll take them." She pulled a handful of coins from her pocket, counted them and turned to Rothir. "Can you lend me twenty drebs?"

He winced but fished in his own pocket for the money. "Who are they for?"

"Two of the women," she said. "Oh, and Rothir, is there by any chance a spare horse in the stables?"

"I thought you already owned two horses."

"I do."

Rothir waited, but no more explanation was forthcoming. "The stable-master should be able to find you a pack-horse at least," he said, "so long as you're not fussy. Give him my name. Tell him I'm your captain."

"I'm not fussy. Thank you, captain."

Rothir nodded. He found it pleased him strangely to be called Captain by Yaret although there was no reason why it should. But it seemed she held no grudge despite their disagreement about darkburns.

Martun set to work sharpening the blades. As the slow rasps ground through the smithy, Veron grew impatient.

"Leave that. The sentry's gone. It's time for us to go as well."

They trooped cautiously out of the smithy into the cold night air. There were smells of woodsmoke and the lowing of distant cattle in the dusk. Yaret lingered at the smith's door to thank Martun, while Veron watch her with brows knit.

"What does she want two swords for?" he muttered to Rothir. "I'm making sure she's not about to head off on some other expedition. Always up to something" Then he shook his head. "How did I not see her following us?"

"You weren't expecting to be followed."

"True. I wasn't concentrating. That is how men die."

Veron said it matter-of-factly: but a shiver ran down Rothir's back. As they began the walk back he was very aware of the long impervious wall that marched alongside them, carrying its shadows of striped black and silver... For an unhinged moment he felt as if that wall held in a city filled not just with people, but with swirling plots and passions and ambitions: a smouldering mix of ten thousand fervent wills that could set the place alight.

What nonsense, he thought. It was the smell of woodsmoke that was putting fantasies into his brain. He shook his head to dispel them. Then he dropped back to keep company with Yaret, who was limping slightly.

"Let me carry those swords," he said. "Is your foot troubling you?" He made himself ask this, for in fact, the foot troubled *him*; but it would not be fair to let Yaret know it.

She handed him the two sheathed swords. "A little."

"Get Shebel to look at it."

"She already has."

"But it still fits?"

"The wooden foot? Yes. It seems indestructible – unlike the rest of me."

"If it truly is root-wood from the Farwth, it could last seven hundred years."

"Is that how old the Farwth is?"

"I don't know," said Rothir. "That's a guess." And to move the subject away from missing feet, and darkburns, and the night, he began to talk about the ancient forest of Farwithiel, recalling the previous times that he'd been there.

Even to speak of Farwithiel seemed to surround him with its deep, dripping peace. Now the heavy wall alongside him lost its stoniness and was transformed for the moment into the vast living wall of the Farwth, the interwoven stems and trunks and leaves that made a barrier even more resilient than stone. And just as impenetrable. He shook his head again. Gold and brown, those stripes were now. And a tiger stalking through them... But there were no tigers in Farwithiel.

"You have seen so many places," said Yaret wistfully. "And you have also visited the sea?"

"I have, many times."

"What is it like?"

"Beneath the surface it can be as green and deep as Farwithiel," he said. "On the top: ah, restless, ever-changing. But it has its own peace too – and its own rhythms."

"Rhythms?"

"Tides and waves." He tried to describe their workings, drawn by the pull of the moon; and felt the slow tides pulling through his mind.

He looked up. No moon there. Perhaps he was not quite back to normal yet.

But he had managed to fulfil his task. He had not let Veron down. Together they had saved the city from the darkburn.

And Yaret's voice when next she spoke was not so sombre as before; so that was good.

"Shall we march anywhere near the coast when the army finally rides out?" she asked.

"I don't know all Huldarion's plans. Perhaps," he said. "I hope so." Through both his mind and body surged the sea's hypnotic pulse: the flinging hiss of waves on unseen shores.

We carry tides within our heads, he thought, as he walked through flowing, ebbing shadows. We all recognise the sea. I shall like to see her face when she beholds it. That unfathomable mystery.

And there behind these massive walls are pent back other mysteries: such smouldering plots; such secrets burning everywhere – not least our own. For we have deceived Huldarion this very night in the killing of the darkburn. Up to something? We are all up to something.

And yet, for this brief moment in the smoky dusk outside those walls, I am content. It's very strange. I wish that it could last. But here's the gate.

## Chapter 34

"I thought you might not want me to come here after all, this evening," said Maeneb, hesitating in the doorway.

"Why not?" Gaelera fixed her with a cool, unsmiling gaze. She neither bid Maeneb depart from her quarters nor bid her enter. The maid stood aside with her head down as if her mistress were too bright, or perhaps too terrifying, a sight for her to look at. Gaelera was certainly awe-inspiring – in terms of both the splendid intricacy of her dress and its probable weight. She must be fit, thought Maeneb distractedly.

Too aware of her own awkwardness, she replied, "Because of the... the, er, disturbance in the castle. A sudden death, we were informed."

"Informed by who?"

"A servant." Maeneb did not add that the servant was Lady Janeya's maid Piril, and that Piril and Janeya herself were currently sleeping in the attic where Maeneb usually slept. The pair of them had arrived early in the morning, in the laundry cart which left the castle daily.

Piril had poured out the story up in that draughty attic room while Janeya sat white and listless. Piril described how she and another maid – Eral – had accompanied Janeya as she was dragged from Meya's quarters up the stairs of the Tell Tower, and thrown into the chamber at the top.

While the door was slammed and locked on the three women, Janeya had sobbed and wailed without a break for the benefit of the guards outside. (At this point in the story Janeya began to cry again, so perhaps, thought Maeneb, it had not been all pretence.) Meanwhile the maids went into the closet and found the kitchen-maid's corpse waiting there. Felipa had been dead perhaps three hours, and although the muscles of her face were rigid her body had not yet begun to stiffen.

But there was no time to spare. The maids got to work. Janeya's dress was stripped off her and put on to the corpse: Janeya herself – still weeping – was re-dressed in her maid's spare clothes, which had been brought up in the bundles that the pair of maids had carried with them. The dead girl's bloodstained skirts were buried deep in the same bundle.

Eral unbraided and carefully dressed Felipa's hair before braiding Janeya's into the tight knots required of serving-wenchs. By now the body was completely rigid and would stay so for some time. But that did not matter, for the time of death would not be clear in any case.

Eventually Janeya ceased her weeping; but none of the three had slept. They had waited for the depths of night. Then Piril had stood up – she told this to her small audience in a low voice, but with determination – and had seized the dead girl by the shoulders before slamming her face repeatedly against the stone wall and the window mullion. Once the face was unrecognisable, the maids together had tipped the corpse out of the window.

Nobody else seemed to hear the faint thud in the darkness as it landed far below. All remained quiet. The maids cleaned up the bloodied stonework, helped Janeya to hide herself in the closet, and themselves pretended to lie down in sleep.

But sleep was impossible. Piril said that she lay straining her ears and hearing nothing but the pounding of her heart. It was another hour or two before another, louder pounding drowned out her heartbeat: for just before dawn the body was discovered, and soldiers raced up the stairs of the Tell Tower and barged in.

They seized the maids but did not look inside the closet. Why would they? After the two maids had been dragged away down the stairs, Janeya was able to slip out in her maid's apparel. Meya had met her in the passage and scolded her past a group of soldiers

hurrying the other way. Then Janeya had been hidden in Meya's rooms – Durba was still there – while Meya herself ran back to the courtyard underneath the Tower, to pretend shock and amazement at Janeya's suicide.

As soon as Meya returned with the two maids, she managed the disappearance of Piril and Janeya from the castle. She went to hail the laundry cart as it came through the back gate, and told the driver to take the morning off: the laundry would be late "because of a sudden upset." It was Durba, cloaked and hooded, who then drove the cart back out a little later with its baskets of soiled linen and the two women acting as the laundry-maids.

Once the baskets of linen had been delivered to the laundries, the two supposed maids were delivered to Durba's lodgings. There, sitting on a bunk, Piril finished the telling of the tale in whispers – for the presence of the pair was unknown to any of the other women, sleeping on the lower floors.

Piril seemed to be quite a resourceful maid; practical and plain-speaking. Maeneb preferred her to Janeya, who did nothing but lie on Durba's bunk and weep silently until eventually she slept. Maeneb could feel the swirl of Janeya's emotions and judged them to be a vigorous but shallow whirlpool. She knew that this judgement was probably unfair.

"What servant gave you this interesting information?" asked Gaelera now.

"Some... ah, footman, near the gate."

"Such tattling servants should be whipped," Gaelera said without expression. "The disturbance was small enough, but servants will make everything a drama."

Turning smoothly, she glided down the arched hallway and into another room with a heavy rustling of her skirts. It was as if she were accompanied by a wheezing animal. A decorative bear maybe, disguised as a dress. After another moment's hesitation, Maeneb followed.

Then she paused in the next doorway, again awaiting Gaelera's invitation to go in. She stood on the threshold of a receiving-room, richly furnished with the obligatory hangings, several cupboards deeply carved in some dark wood, and at the far end well lit by a many-paned window that curved around a cushioned window seat. Three small chests before the seat were draped with cloth, and held embroidery frames and trays containing reels of coloured thread.

A pair of scissors lay on the cushion of the window-seat: Gaelera picked them up and held them against her bodice, point up. Theatrical, again, thought Maeneb, although there was nothing dramatic in Gaelera's manner.

"Sit," she said. "Bring us spiced small wine." The second instruction was evidently to the maid, who hurried away.

Gaelera lit the ornate double lamps on each side of the window. The sudden light brought colours leaping from the hangings, yet little warmth.

The only place to sit was on the window-seat. Gaelera arranged her skirts around her as she sat. Maeneb perched on its edge, as far as possible from Gaelera and the spreading dress as was consistent with politeness.

"It was very kind of you to invite me here," she said, although the note that had been delivered to her had contained more of command than kindness.

"You wished to view my embroideries."

"I would be honoured."

"So you said," replied Gaelera. Putting the scissors down beside her, she kept her hand on them as she gazed unblinkingly at Maeneb.



Are they her equivalent of my knife? she wondered, and instinctively checked with her elbow for the shape of her long knife underneath her tunic. The little fruit knife was always in her pocket.

But it was not possible to read anything of Gaelera's mind. As on their first meeting, Maeneb was disconcerted to find such a complete mental barrier set against her. The fact that Gaelera could know nothing of her mind-sensing abilities only made it the more striking. Who was the woman defending herself against?

Maeneb made an effort at some sort of conversation. "You told me in the music hall that you embroidered your life."

"I spoke the truth." Gaelera reached forward to pick up a piece of fabric from the top of the nearest chest. Held in a round frame, it showed half a scene embroidered in richly coloured silks with the rest of the picture drawn out in thin charcoal lines. A woman sat in the centre of a many-paned window, her hands crossed in her lap, surrounded by chests covered in cloth. It gave Maeneb an odd feeling as if she were looking down a long tunnel or enclosed spyhole.

"That is you," she said.

"Yes. I am almost up to the present day. This has been my life for some time now. But of course it will continue beyond this point." She put the embroidery frame down again. "What has your life been?"

While Maeneb wondered how to answer, the maid brought in a tray holding two goblets and a jug. She was wary of drinking until she saw Gaelera take a sip. It was wine, pleasantly diluted with some sweet juice and sprinkled with spices. She drank, considering what was safe to say.

"My life has been mixed," she said. "I belonged to Caervonn for the first seventeen years of it. In Caervonn I was mostly happy, I suppose." This was a lie; she had never considered herself happy anywhere. "But the last two of those years were dark and difficult."

"You had a civil war."

"It was more of a civil disagreement, until it became an uncivil one. You know the history? Huldarion should by our laws have been heir to the throne. His cousin Olvirion disagreed. Huldarion was willing to seek arbitration as to who was rightful king, but Olvirion would not allow him. And then... everything blew up in our faces."

"The darkburn," said Gaelera.

"Yes." She remembered the thickening smoke, the burning towers – some of them not so unlike this tower she sat in, apart from their hexagonal shape – and more than anything, she recalled the panic, the screams, the running in the streets. Maeneb had run too, hurrying after her mother with an armful of belongings, barging into other frantic runners, not knowing where they were going except that it had to be away from the fires. From the deaths and the destruction. She swallowed.

"You do not wish to talk about it," said Gaelera, as a statement of fact, not of compassion.

"No."

"And afterwards? Where did you belong?"

"Everywhere and nowhere. After the fire, a few thousand of us left Caervonn, accompanying Huldarion. He was terribly burnt yet never lost his consciousness, nor his grasp of the situation. He directed us from the cart where he lay." She gazed into space, remembering the agony that he had felt. She had tried to shut it out but it was always there: an agony of mind as well as of his skin and flesh. An agony of loss...

"Where did you go?"

"Wherever Huldarion directed us to go. We fled at first to Outer Kelvha, where we had friends, but we moved constantly those first few years. Wherever we went we were pursued by stonemen."

"And darkburns."

"No, that was not until later. The stonemen were bad enough." Those nomadic years had sometimes been exciting to the teenage Maeneb; but soon became tedious, with the fatigue of long anxiety. The physical fatigue too, with days of riding, the work of putting the tents up and down, the constant packing and repacking.

No matter where they unpacked, nowhere had been home – except, perhaps, Farwithiel, the hidden forest where her father lived. The first time she had visited it she had felt the connection not just with the Farwth but with the place itself. But she would not mention that.

"Your tented city is called Thield," said Gaelera in her measured way, as if imparting new information to her. "At its greatest, it contains many hundred tents. It is currently located to the south west, less than half way to Weld, so not a very great distance from here."

"Is it? I didn't know."

"Everywhere and nowhere."

"Yes. But I don't need to belong anywhere."

"That is fortunate." Gaelera reached back and opened a casement window behind her shoulder. Maeneb felt herself twitch forward as the window with its tiny diamond panes was blown wide open. A warm breeze wafted in, lifting the corners of the fabric pieces strewn around the tower.

"This is my home," Gaelera said, which seemed self-evident, until she continued, "This room. This window-seat. This cushion. I make my home very small. You do not mind the breeze?"

"Not at all. But I worry that – well, the window opens so wide. And this room is up high. You may fall."

"I will not fall," Gaelera said, "unless I choose. And while some people choose to fall, I do not think I ever will." She stared out of the window, her face turned half away. What she was looking at, Maeneb could not tell: dusk was falling, and through its veil there were only more high walls dotted with the blank eyes of other windows, screened and obscured. She knew a courtyard was below but it could not be seen.

"It was cleverly done," said Gaelera thoughtfully, "but she was too cold." She turned back to face Maeneb. "You do not know what I am talking about."

"No."

"Good. Keep it that way. Whatever you learn – and I expect some rumour will reach you – I do not wish to hear."

Maeneb bowed her head in agreement; to what, she was not sure.

"You like to wear male clothing," said Gaelera.

"It is convenient," said Maeneb. "For riding, and for fighting. And yes, I like it. It is comfortable."

"You think my clothing must be most uncomfortable," said Gaelera, passing her hands across her skirts without touching them, her fingers splayed. An odd, ritualistic gesture. It struck Maeneb that the wearing of the dress itself constituted some necessary ritual.

"I expect it too is convenient," she said, "for you. For your fighting."

She did not know why she said it, and immediately felt foolish. But Gaelera laughed: a completely silent, eerie laugh.

"My fighting," she said appreciatively. "Ah, yes. My dresses give me camouflage. They are a subterfuge. An excuse for all the stitching. Let me show you the rest of my life."

She stood up and walked, rustling, to the tall, elaborately carved cupboard directly opposite the window. When she opened the double doors Maeneb saw inside layers and layers of folded cloth.

"My childhood," said Gaelera, lifting out two rolls of fabric and unfolding one. The length between her outstretched hands was perhaps a yard and a half long; it was less than a yard wide. The thick cream linen was adorned with several embroidered girls – or possibly all the same girl – running through a field of flowers, bowling a hoop, throwing a ball, playing with a dog.

"Very nice," said Maeneb. The subject matter was innocuous enough but did not seem to merit such exquisite stitching.

"It was," Gaelera said. "It was a very nice life until I was seven, and had to return from the country to the castle."

"You did not like life in the castle?"

"Not at first. I grew accustomed to it. My mother returned to the country – for the sake of her health – but left me with my father in the castle, as was customary. I was not tutored except in the female basics: such as embroidery. I now excel at embroidery." She rolled up the childhood picture and opened the roll further along its length, to reveal another scene. A child again, but a bigger one, sat upright and unsmiling on a stool, sewing, with an equally unsmiling woman standing over her.

"You did not enjoy it," observed Maeneb.

"I became used to it as I did to most things. Life in the castle has its own small pleasures." She picked up the second roll of fabric and displayed a section.

"A feast," said Maeneb. The silken tables were laid with tiny, perfectly sewn dishes, although the people seated all along them did not appear to eat. "Is that you?" The little figure in the centre not only had Gaelera's colouring, but, somehow, had her posture and her bearing.

Gaelera inclined her head. "In the purple dress. I was sixteen. The gentleman at the far right end of the table was shortly to offer for my hand."

"Which... presumably, you refused."

"I did. My father advised me to. I was not sorry. The man was too low-ranking. He had bad breath besides." She unrolled the linen by another yard.

A courtyard: a couple standing face to face. The man held out his hand. The woman did not.

"Another refusal," said Gaelera. "My father was not so pleased this time. He had advised me to accept. I told him I was waiting for a better man."

"And did a better man come along?" asked Maeneb. She instantly wished that she had said nothing, for clearly the better man had not appeared.

"He did," Gaelera said. She rolled up the fabric carefully, smoothing out a crease as she did so. "I have not embroidered him. I keep him elsewhere."

"Who...?"

"No, you may not ask. It came to nothing. He was commanded not to offer for me. He obeyed."

"He can't have been that much better, then," said Maeneb.

"He was wise," Gaelera said with the faintest lift of her eyebrows. It was the only facial expression that she had so far shown. "It means that he is still alive, though living far away, having sensibly married into Outer Kelvha. He was in fact too good for me, since I am not a better woman."

"I am sure..."

"I am my father's daughter." She carried the two rolls back to the cupboard, replaced them, and selected two more from another shelf.

She started to unroll one. "Another offer," she said, revealing the next scene. A garden: small, neat trees and roses. A girl sat on a seat beside the roses: a man bent over her. He had a grey beard. It was very cleverly sewn.

Maeneb said nothing. It seemed obvious what was coming.

"I refused him," said Gaelera. "I gave the reason that he had been married twice already. The truth is he disgusted me. He still does."

"Oh." That escaped Maeneb without intention.

"At least I do not have to live with him. I have to live with something else instead." She unrolled the bolt of cloth further. "My father was angry. He told me that I had no right to refuse the man he chose that I should marry. I said he was too old. Too old? my father said. There is no such thing as too old for a man, only for a woman. A man can get a child at any age, unlike a woman, he said."

The picture showed a confrontation. Nerogun's figure, though small, was unmistakable. Somehow Gaelera's stitches conveyed his assertive, almost aggressive stance, his jutting chin and frown.

"He said, you'll get no husband at all at this rate. I told him that I didn't care. I wish for no husband, I announced, especially not that grey-beard. He asked if I would flout his authority over me. I told him yes."

She stared up from the fabric in her hands, looking through the window; looking at nothing.

"He said that I was his to do with as he liked. That he would teach me a lesson about grey-beards. That they were powerful, and potent, and that I was nothing. This is the lesson that he taught me."

She unrolled another yard.

"Oh," said Maeneb, in shock. "Is..." She stopped. Plainly it was.

And again. The woman was turned round this time, skirts ripped, her back to the man, her mouth an O of pain.

And again. This time she was on her knees, her mouth against his body.

Maeneb had to turn her head away. Her heart was thumping hard with fear and anger. She did not want to see any of those things, even drawn in stitchery. She did not want to imagine them. She wanted to run Nerogun through with her long knife.

As Gaelera had, she looked out through the window, at those closed eyes of other windows.

"I am sorry," she managed to say at last.

"Why are you sorry? It is for him to be sorry. He has never shown sorrow for it, but he will be sorry if I choose. And he knows it."

Gaelera rolled up the embroidery and placed it on the window seat; then turned to the last roll, a large and heavy one.

"No more," said Maeneb.

"No? But this one is quite tame and dull," Gaelera said. "This is my life since that day."

She dropped the roll to the floor and allowed it to unspin itself along the carpet. A woman sat in a window-seat, surrounded by chests and bolts of cloth. And again. And again. And again. She wore different dresses. Sometimes she was sewing; sometimes her hands lay folded in her lap. The light in the window changed, but the woman – apart from dress and hands – did not.

“Why,” Maeneb managed to say, “why are you showing me this?”

Gaelera began to roll up the last bolt of fabric with her foot. It seemed to occupy her so that she could not answer. Eventually she said,

“My father climbs upon the backs of others and does not care if he breaks them. He will do the same to the Vonn.”

“You do not care about the Vonn,” said Maeneb, because although she could read nothing of Gaelera’s mind, that was one thing she was sure of.

“Not a jot. I care for Kelvha. My lord the Post-Regent also cares for Kelvha; but he cares more about himself. He will go too far.” She picked up the bolt of cloth from the floor and placed it neatly on the other. “He will betray my country. I do not believe that the High Prince will ever be permitted to become High King.”

Maeneb drew in a sharp breath. “That is a....”

“That would be a very dangerous thing to say in any other room. But I have stopped up all my spy-holes; and I admit no spies.”

“Do you have evidence?”

“No. But I am his daughter. I see how nothing is ever enough for him. I understand how the more he has, the less it means. He feels nothing, so he seeks for something he can feel.”

“You may understand that, but I don’t,” said Maeneb.

“I tell you it is so. I do not wish to allow him to damage Kelvha. He will probably betray the Vonn as well; so you must advise your chieftain. Warn Huldarion that my father will only support him for as long as it suits his purposes. Will you do that?”

“Yes.”

“The Vonn may be able to act against him. Somebody needs to. I fear for the High Prince and my whole country otherwise. Huldarion may be the man who can bring my father down. But you may not tell anyone of all this.” Gaelera indicated the folded cloths. “No-one is to know of it until my death. Until then, my embroidered life is to be hidden here.”

“But you have just told me,” said Maeneb. “Why?”

“Because you are alone, as I am; cast out, as I am: apart and separate. We are both alone and therefore not alone. We stand on distant shores, and yet we recognise each other across an unfathomable sea.” Gaelera gazed at her, expressionless. Then she dropped her gaze and made as if to pick up the rolls of cloth.

“Stop,” said Maeneb. “I will carry those.” It was the only way that she could relieve Gaelera of any part of her horrific burden. The bolts of cloth were surprisingly heavy. She carried them to the cupboard and replaced them on the shelves.

When she turned around, Gaelera was regarding her with a half-smile. It was a shock to see her still, enigmatic face take such a shape.

“You pity me,” she said.

“Of course I do,” said Maeneb.

“Don’t. I have my compensations. My father is afraid of me; and I know how to twist and tweak his fear as you know how to use that long knife in your belt. It is your friend when you have no other.”

Maeneb swallowed. Who was the mind-reader now? For her own part, she could still sense nothing of Gaelera's feelings. All was a blank: an empty page, behind the half-smile and the rustling over-decorated dress.

"Should you not be afraid of your father?" she murmured, as if Nerogun might overhear.

"What can he do more than he already has? But I have made arrangements, and he knows it. That is why he is afraid, and why he will not harm me." Gaelera again smoothed down an invisible layer of skirt with both her hands. "I relish his alarm. You see, I am my father's daughter."

"I see you are," said Maeneb, although she felt that she saw nothing else. What dreadful mental wounds had this woman carried through the years, beneath her formal carapace? She was a mask; as unknown and unreadable as a darkburn.

*Darkburn.* She did not know why the thought of that horror leapt to her mind now, unless it was simply a reflection of the fear and fury with which Gaelera's embroidered life had filled her.

But no. There was something more than that. She raised her head and sniffed the breeze that blew in through the open window.

"Smoke," she said.

## Chapter 35

Leor gave the signal as soon as he saw the two new guards come marching round the corner by the northern bath-house. From the upper window of the empty warehouse where he crouched, shielded by his magic and looking down at the twilit street, he immediately threw the paper dart he had prepared. On leaving his hand it became a hawk – what variety of hawk, he wasn't sure, for it was indeterminate; but it did the job.

As the strange hawk squawked its way to the top of the wall, one of the guards already positioned outside the bath-house looked up, although without really paying attention. It was not until the new pair had nearly reached the door that Leor set up his first proper distraction. He had been eyeing the opposite roof from his high window: now he loosened a tile and sent it sliding down with a swift rasping clatter, quickly followed by another.

An innocuous enough occurrence once you worked out what it was. But the initial effect was to make both arriving guards leap back as the tiles crashed to the ground close to their feet. They called out urgently to their fellows.

"There's someone on your roof! How did they get up there?"

The two men currently on guard stepped out from their sheltered post at the bath-house entrance. Crossing the road, they squinted upwards at the roof.

"Can't see anyone. Anyway, it's too steep for a man to be up there," said one at last. "Might have been a cat. Or just the building giving up at last. It's gimcrack around here, the building work. Things just fall down when you look at them."

As soon as he saw the men start to return across the road, Leor loosened another tile; and then three more, in quick succession. All four guards halted in the middle of the road in fresh consternation while the tiles smashed on the cobbles.

"The whole damn building's falling down!"

"That's the northern quarter for you."

"Are you sure there's nobody on the roof?"

"Can *you* see anyone?"

"It's not the demon?"

"Nah. He's all quiet. Hardly been banging around at all today. Still stinks, though. Got your nose-pegs ready? Let me get my cloak before I go."

The guard was about to dive back inside the bath-house when Leor launched his next wave of noise into the dusk. This was a trick he had not tried before: it was the deflection of the sound of a drunken group of revellers who were wandering the streets a full half mile away. He had caught the faint edge of their cheers and shouts. Now he steered the sound so that it echoed through an alley only twenty yards from the bath-house door.

"Nobody's meant to be in that section!" said the first guard indignantly. "Can't they read the signs?"

"Drunks. Let's give them a bit of a scare, shall we?"

The two new guards and one of the old ones drew their swords and ran towards the alley, while the fourth remained outside the bath-house. Leor had to work fast to deflect the noise of the carousing again; now it came from the street at the alley's far end. He heard the clatter of the soldiers' boots heading that way, while the fourth guard had another long squint up at the roof. Should he send another tile down on the man's head? No. Too much.

The other three were absent for some time, looking for the non-existent revellers. Veron had had several minutes now in which to organise the release and killing of the darkburn.

Leor wasn't sure if that was enough; but now, to his relief, there came another distraction – this time one not made by him.

A small procession on horseback was arriving. It consisted of eight more soldiers, who flanked a pair of noblemen. In the swinging lamps held by the soldiers he recognised the features of Shargun, the old grey-bearded Kelvhan Marshal whom he recalled with dislike from the battlefield up north. The other man he had previously seen only from a distance: none the less, the broad, bullish figure and heavy watchful face were unmistakably those of Nerogun.

Leor shielded himself as thoroughly as he could, and leant out of the window as far as he dared. There he listened and observed.

"Guard?" demanded Shargun in his peremptory way. "Where's your partner? Why aren't you changing over?"

"The others are just checking out a disturbance, sir." The sole guard outside the bath-house stood to alarmed attention. The three others came clattering back up the alley and halted in equal alarm on seeing the riders. One of them began to stammer out an explanation until Shargun rode forward and clipped him round the head.

"Open up the door, you fools. Let's see the demon."

"Yes, sir. Excuse me, but... but do you have your stones, sir?"

Nerogun held up his clenched fist. "Of course we do. We are not idiots." His voice was full and resonant; the voice of a man used to being obeyed.

"Yes, sir. I mean, no, of course not, sir. The demon will be at the back of its enclosure, sir, as usual. That's where it always skulks."

Leor wondered whether to attempt another diversion before they went in. One more tile could give Veron a few more minutes. Before he could do anything, however, someone else appeared.

Precarious as his position was, Leor immediately froze, hanging half out of the window. He dared not move a muscle. He had shielded himself; but would it be enough?

It had been enough the other day. How strange that Adon, once so familiar to him, should now inspire him with such fear. For it was fear that he felt now. And regret. Dismay. Disgust. And perhaps, almost, a little love.

Adon was on foot. He had appeared out of the shadows with such suddenness that it were as if the walls had given up some of their stone and re-formed it in man's shape. Or wizard's shape. Adon was himself today, not in any other guise: not quite so tall as Leor, nor so thin and ugly; better formed altogether. The lamplight shone upon a perfect, unmarked face, beautiful in its way, as a statue's might be beautiful. Adon showed no signs of age.

"You will need protection when you release the thing," he said. His voice was musical. A silken tenor. The various guards and soldiers stood yet more stiffly to attention, although one or two eyes darted from side to side as if in anxious fear. Leor knew how they felt. He kept himself rigidly still, although the strain on his arms, he knew, would soon make them start to quiver.

Do not quiver. Be as marble, as Adon is. Be invisible. Listen.

"We have the stones," said Shargun.

"You will need more than those, if you are too close when you let it out," the musical voice continued. A long arm waved gracefully from underneath the cloak. "I can provide protection for you until you are out of the fire's way. You had better return quickly to the castle."

"The fire won't spread beyond the northern streets," Nerogun said. "We'll get the army to work on it before it can burn out of control."



The head of one of the listening soldiers twitched. His glance shot over towards Nerogun.

The soldiers didn't know about his plans, thought Leor; they didn't know about his aim to set the darkburn loose inside the northern quarter. Will they get protection too?

Adon shrugged. "Very well. If you think you do not need my help..."

"We don't," said Shargun, so abruptly that Leor found his own hackles rising. Don't speak that way to him, he thought, Adon will not like it. Do not displease him.

But Adon said nothing. He merely looked at Shargun, his head a little on one side.

"Well, open up!" commanded Shargun, turning to the guards. "We've wasted enough time. I'm not standing around here all night."

The men hastened to unlatch and push open the heavy doors. Leor's fingers clenched more tightly on the window-frame. Had he made them waste sufficient time?

Even as the four guards marched inside he realised that indeed Veron had done the job. For he could no longer feel the darkburn's aura. From his post up here it had been faint but ever-present, like a distant continuous noise: a pall of misery and dread. Its disappearance had been camouflaged by the arrival of the soldiers and then of Adon. Leor had been distracted as thoroughly as his opponents.

But now the darkburn was destroyed. He had no doubt of it.

And a minute later everybody knew – for a guard came bursting from the bath-house, babbling about the missing demon, which must have flown out through the roof and set the tiles all tumbling. Shargun dismounted, struck the man into silence and ran in. Nerogun followed him more ponderously. Adon's head turned slowly as if to look up and down the street.

Angry voices echoed from the bath-house; and Nerogun came striding out again, ahead of the others, and snapped out orders. His own troop of soldiers at once surrounded the four hapless bath-house guards, corralling them up against the wall.

"Kill them," said Nerogun tersely.

"Sir." But the captain to whom he had spoken did not move. "Now, sir?" Leor thought he recognised the man from up north. A tough, hard-faced captain. He bore the same insignia on his helmet as the bath-house guards: they were of the same regiment.

"When else?"

"Sir. If the demon has truly disappeared, perhaps an investigation would be–"

"Captain Amerrun, are you questioning my orders? Kill these guards. The thing is missing. The outer gate was securely locked. They have betrayed us somehow, through either corruption or incompetence."

"Sir," said Amerrun with the faintest note of protest. "Perhaps if the demon–"

Nerogun drew his sword with a swift screaming hiss of metal, and the captain fell silent. Swinging round, Nerogun plunged his blade into the nearest captive. The man did not die: he collapsed back against the wall with a strange gasping sound, hands grasped to his abdomen. At once the captain drew his own sword, stepped forward and with one decisive stroke through the ribs dispatched the man.

"And the others," said Nerogun. "Unless you wish your whole troop to die instead."

He and Adon watched the captain kill the three remaining guards, Adon with a faint, bland smile upon his lips. It seemed to Leor that the captain locked eyes briefly with each prisoner before giving a swift sword-thrust to the heart. Each man took no more than a few seconds to lapse into unconsciousness. The last man began to cry and plead: then the sword-thrust was given, and he died the most swiftly of them all.

It was cleanly done, if such a slaying could be cleanly done. But Nerogun frowned and pouted, as if he would have preferred more noise and blood, before saying, "All right. Now stand aside. We wish to consult."

Captain Amerrun and his men retreated down the street, well out of earshot. Amerrun's face might have been carved out of stone.

Shargun, who had not watched the killings but had glowered at the ground, said, "Well, so much for that! The thing is gone. It's plainly nowhere in the city or we would have seen the smoke by now. We may as well go home."

"Why?" said Adon. That musical note. It made you want to listen to him even if you did not register the words.

"Isn't it obvious? We've lost our weapon," said Shargun impatiently. Oh, that is not the way to talk to Adon, Leor thought. It will anger him just as it would me.

But Adon replied smoothly without showing any annoyance. "Nobody else knows that."

"*Somebody* knows," said Nerogun. "Somebody ordered those guards to let the darkburn out."

"But for that very reason, somebody will not say what they know."

"Who could it have been?" growled Shargun.

Nerogun compressed his mouth and did not answer. He does not like to admit ignorance, thought Leor.

"When you planned to release the darkburn," said Adon in a pleasant tone of enquiry, "whom did you intend to blame?"

"Incompetent soldiers," said Nerogun.

"But they are *your* soldiers."

The Post-Regent shrugged. "I will have that troop and their recalcitrant captain put to death later on."

"That would be wise, especially since they now know of your plan," said Adon in his melodic voice.

And that is your fault, for you told them, thought Leor in an agony of mind. How many lives would Adon waste so carelessly? But no, Adon was not careless. He was careful in destruction. All this was deliberate.

Adon was still speaking. "Meanwhile, you do not have a darkburn; but you still have fire."

Shargun stared at him. "You mean that.... we can still fire the city, and blame the darkburn for it?"

"Indeed. And you can probably find someone more worthwhile to blame for its release, in addition to your soldiers," said Adon casually.

"Somebody else," said Nerogun with heavy deliberation. He rubbed his chin. "Yes. Yes, Melegan, the Keeper of the Keys. He must have held the keys to all the city buildings, must he not? Until he carelessly lost some of them. Or allowed them to be stolen. Yes. I see it now. This is Melegan's fault."

"Good," said Adon in his light voice. "Shall I fire the buildings now?"

"Can you?"

"Easily," Adon replied. "Just watch."

He made no gesture. He did not even raise a hand. He merely seemed to breathe out gently – perhaps he murmured a few words – and Leor heard a hiss and crackle. He could not see where the fire had started, however, for several seconds; when he abruptly realised that it was above him. It was in the roof.

He swung himself back into the room and hoped that his shielding had not slipped. But Adon had not even been looking at the building he had fired.

Leor ran down the narrow stairs and through the back of the warehouse, where he shook the hunter awake. The man – Zan, he was called – should have been on sentry duty but instead was snoring on a pile of sacks.

“Fire,” said Leor tersely. “Get out of the building. Hurry! We need to spread the alarm and warn anyone in its path.”

They ran out of the back door together and looked up at the flames curling around the roof. These did not act like normal flames; for they were heading downwards, creeping down the building towards ground level rather than leaping for the sky as would normally be expected. The walls, which were built of wood, were already catching fire faster than seemed likely.

Zan stared at the smouldering building open-mouthed. “What’s going on? Did Veron not reach the darkburn in time?”

“This isn’t the darkburn,” Leor told him grimly. “Go and wake the neighbours! Tell them to get out!”

He pushed Zan one way while he himself ran the other, to pound at the door of the neighbouring building. For this street, unlike that of the bath-house, was populated.

“Fire! Fire!” he yelled before anyone even answered to his banging. But elsewhere people were already trickling out into the streets to look up and point. And then, as one, they screamed and began to flee in panic: for across the road, a whole line of roofs flared up in a roar of sudden orange flame, as if an invisible firedrake had just flown over and fire-bombed them.

Zan gave a strange half-groan and ran off to pound at more doors. Leor was about to do the same when he stopped to think.

Adon would destroy this city by magic, he said to himself. May I not use my powers too, to save it? What better cause for magic could there be? I abjured my wizardry. But now, if ever, is the moment for me to reclaim it. I am a wizard. What else am I for?

He raised his head to study those unnatural flames that poured down the walls from the burning roofs, like streams of fire. What could he do to put them out? Could he pull rain from the clouds?

Perhaps, if there were any clouds; but the sky was almost clear apart from the growing billows of smoke that obscured the stars. And he could not draw clouds in instantly from nowhere.

No rain. But try the wind.

So, just as earlier on he had gathered sounds from a distant alley, now Leor set his mind to gather the wind that swirled in the streets, and direct it at the flaming rooftops.

A gale hit the roofs with a screaming wail. At first he thought he had made a terrible mistake, for he was appalled to see the flames on the nearest rooftop merely growing in size and dancing wildly; but then, to his relief, they spiralled upward in a kind of funnel, and then went out.

Starve the fire of air – that was the secret. As another roof burst into flame over to his left, he tried to do the same again, sucking the air from the fire and funnelling it upwards. It worked, after a fashion; but it was not easy.

And even though he could put out those nearest fires, it was only one at a time, and he saw them starting up again mere minutes later. Meanwhile, the walls were still burning wherever they had caught: and the scattered glows he glimpsed further away indicated that fire after fire was continuing to break out across the whole of the northern quarter.

Leor abandoned his attempts to harness the wind and hurried down to the crossroads to get a better view of what was going on. The streets were filling up with people, some in their

night-clothes. While many ran away from the blazing buildings, others ran towards them, crying out names in horror, their shrieks and shouts punctuating the growing roar and snarl of fire. The air was full of sparks and drifting ash. A man ran past him carrying a bucket of water, a pitiful sight.

Leor put his head in his hands. He could not bear the thought of all the lives that would be lost; and he was powerless to stop it.

Then he raised his head.

"Not powerless," he said. "I will not allow this. I will not allow Adon to do this."

He had no bucket, but there was a whole river nearby. It was the sluggish watercourse that ran across the city, and drained the northern quarter beneath the recently repaired bridge.

Now Leor fixed his mind upon this river. He had raised the darkburn in its iron cage from underground with what had seemed like ease. Why should he not raise a river? He felt across the streets for its heavy cold fluidity, trying to grasp it with his mind. It was slippery and unwilling to be grasped.

Finally he thought he had it. He willed and dragged a mass of water slowly up into the air. It did not want to be dragged. When he bid it take itself across the houses he felt it start to break up, and had to command it with increasing force to stay together while he made it move. He saw the quivering mass of water pass just overhead, spurting water across the street like a leaky ceiling.

Nobody beneath it seemed to notice. The airborne load of water was just a clump of darkness in the darker sky: all eyes were fixed upon the orange flames that sprang up in new places every moment, dazzling the senses.

Leor directed the mass of water to hover over the fiercest of the flames before he let it go. There was a shock of relief in doing so. The water dumped itself upon the blazing building: the flames disappeared, tried to revive, and then lapsed down again, to groans and gasps from the nearby crowd.

But there were more flames shooting up elsewhere. He returned his mind to the river and determinedly began to raise a second mass of water.

This time people noticed what was happening. Of course nobody connected it with him: he was just a gaunt old man standing transfixed at the crossroads, staring like everybody else and getting drenched like everybody else as the water passed tremblingly overhead, dropping clumps of showers. The water stank. He dumped the remainder of it on another burning rooftop, and returned his mind to the river to begin again.

But it was hard work. Very hard. He was dismayed at the diminishing of his powers. Maybe he was too long out of practice; but in truth he had never attempted such a feat before. The next unwieldy bulk of water quivered and then broke up in a spate of heavy downpours before he could steer it where he wanted. Leor despaired. He could not put out all these fires by himself – there were too many.

With relief he saw more conventional help arriving. A line of clattering carts drove smartly up: two halted close by, and Kelvhan soldiers jumped out of them, equipped with flails and beaters. These proved effective against the smaller fires that were springing up abundantly in the litter of the streets, although the soldiers did not venture into any of the burning buildings.

But now more aid was coming, in the form of the Riders of the Vonn. For a small battalion of them, led by Ikelder, came running along the street on foot, with wet cloths wrapped around their faces. They split into pairs, hastening to enter doorways and conduct the people out.

Leor wondered if he ought to do the same; but he could be more effective as a water-shifter. So he had another attempt at lifting a fresh load from the river – not so much this time – and managed to convey it to a smoking house across the road. There he let it drop, somewhat indiscriminately: two of the Riders got soaked, along with the four old people whom they were helping to get out.

One of the Riders came striding over to him. It was Maeneb; her hair was sodden.

“Was that you, Leor? Are you trying to poison us? That’s sewage water!”

“It’s water,” Leor said. “I’m trying to save you.”

“Don’t bother.” Maeneb spoke with unusual fury. “You didn’t start the fires as well, did you?”

He was shocked. “No, of course not! That was Nerogun, when he failed to release the darkburn into the city.”

“He *what*?” Maeneb stared at him in disbelief. “Why would he want to do such a thing? To set his own city on fire?”

“I don’t know. But he didn’t succeed in freeing the darkburn: so Adon started the fires for him.”

She shook her head in horror and disbelief and ran off to another smoking building. When Leor saw her enter, and Durba run in after her, he was terrified on their behalf. Despite Durba’s battle-shock she seemed to have no fear of being devoured by flames. Yet those wooden buildings could collapse in minutes.

Behind him, as if to prove the point, he heard the crash and rumble of falling rafters. He reached for another water-load – a smaller one again – and practically threw it at the tenement that the two Riders had run into.

Everywhere that he could see was now ablaze. There was only one building in the whole long street before him which was not on fire. It was the Temple of Borgun; and he realised that a priest was hurrying from its doorway with a bucket, and beckoning the stricken people in.

“You’ll be safe in here,” he called. “We are stone and will not burn.”

A few people limped towards its doors; but one man hurrying past shouted out something about demons and wizardry. They all ignored Leor, who leaned against the wall, apparently resting, while he tried to summon up the strength to lift more water. Who knew that it was so heavy and so uncontrollable?

Just like the sea, he thought.

Of course. The sea. What I need is not rain, but a tide.

He felt for the river again. But this time he did not attempt to lift a mass of water in the air. Instead, he sent the watercourse’s sluggish flow pushing and surging against its banks, to and fro, to and fro, as if he were rocking some massive serpent in a cradle. He could feel the water sway and rebound from side to side. He pushed again, and to his surprise felt suddenly the muscular force of its release as it overflowed the banks in a heady rush.

In another moment he saw the dark tide flood across the street in front of him. People were suddenly wading ankle-deep: foul water lapped at Leor’s boots. Within seconds the flames on the ground floors of the buildings opposite were fizzingly extinguished. A few men seized buckets and began to ladle up the water and throw it on other fires.

Leor pushed again at the river, feeling for that heavy swarming flow, encouraging it into slow rebellion so that it overwhelmed its banks a second time. Another surge of murky, stinking water rushed through the streets, riding on the first, refuelling the flood. More fires went out.

When he readied himself for the third push, he knew how to do it. It was all about the channelling, the directing of the force. Let it flow within the river. Let it run with the tide.

Something was crowing inside him. He beat it down – for this was not the time for selfish triumph – but it was there. His powers were not diminished after all. Rather they had grown.

He thought, I am become as the moon is. I have governed the flowing waters: I have ordained their tides; I have created this small but marvellous sea.

## **Chapter 36**

In the early morning the evidence of the destruction of the northern quarter could be smelt and seen in every corner of the city. Smoke hung heavy in the air, not only over the surrounding streets but throughout the inner courtyards of the castle. A thin layer of fine grey ash lay on every sill, every roof-tile, every exposed surface.

Even inside the Scriptorium the air smelt of smoke – a worrying odour in such a place. At dawn Tamu sat up in the makeshift bed amongst piles of papers behind his desk, and stretched and coughed. He had slept little.

After being awoken late the previous night by the smell of smoke, he had ventured out of his cell-like quarters and tried to work out what was happening. Both lords and servants were running around in consternation, but it seemed to be nothing to do with that day's earlier disruption. That had been about some sudden death, apparently, at the Tell Tower, so probably a suicide. Or a supposed suicide. People had spoken of it only in whispers.

But now, there were shouts, not whispers: warnings were yelled and soldiers summoned. When Tamu spoke to various bewildered servants, it seemed that rumours already abounded as to this new disturbance – the only point of agreement being that the northern quarter was on fire. Tamu at once hurried to his place of work to make sure that it could not be endangered by the ingress of any spark or glowing ash.

Having closed all the Scriptorium's shutters he ran up the narrow stairs to the gently sloping roof, ready with a broom to sweep off any embers that might land there. The roof was mostly tiled in slate, with only a few repaired areas of wooden shingles, but you could not be too careful. Nobody else would bother to protect it if he did not.

And as he perched up there in the twilight he saw below the men – both nobles and officials – hastening to various towers from which they could look out to the north. He himself was not high up enough to see the fire: but the heaving, shifting glow in the sky told him exactly where it was.

Well, he reflected, it was always going to happen some day amongst those ramshackle wood-built streets. Small fires had always broken out from time to time. It was just surprising that a big one hadn't happened sooner. Tamu often frequented a bookseller in the northern quarter – a shop crammed with dusty old parchments, some fake, mostly rubbish, but a few delights – and he thought of that place now with concern. All those potential treasures lost...

And the people, he scolded himself, don't forget the people. But people will generally escape. Books won't.

He leant on his broom and down below him saw the Riders of the Vonn run across the courtyard, all seven of them, although his eyes fixed only on the tallest. They were hurrying to the stables, calling for their horses. His heart swelled, thinking of the heroic rescues that Parthenal might carry out that night.

Then he himself kept sweeping until the tide of sparks and ash seemed to abate, and the glow in the northern sky to dim: and at last he made his bed in the Scriptorium behind his desk and slept with his broom and two buckets of water beside him, just in case.

When he awoke at daybreak to the silent, smoky Scriptorium his first thought was of the Riders and how they had fared. How everyone had fared, of course. Not just them. He tried to feel pity for all those who might have been made destitute by the flames. But in the northern quarter people were so poor and badly housed already that perhaps a fire would hardly make their lives much worse.

The Scriptorium was, thankfully, intact; so after an inspection of the building he went out, locked the door and put a sign on it: *Open at noon*. The copyists would be glad of the morning off, if any of them turned up at all. They would more likely be setting off in the other direction, across the city to view the damage, just as he was himself.

When Tamu made his exit from the castle, he found that half the population of the city seemed to be heading along with him to the northern quarter. He was just one of a steadily moving crowd that rippled through the streets and markets, all hurrying and anxious, apart from a few lordlings on horseback who evidently regarded the whole thing as an entertainment.

He spoke to no-one, but caught a few snatches of talk from those around him. Which of their acquaintances were safe: who wasn't? Which buildings had gone? Had all the fire been put out?

"Where did it start? Was it the bakery?" one woman asked another, as she gathered up her skirts to walk the faster.

"Could have been anywhere, in that quarter. They're always setting fires in doorways there."

"I heard it was vagrants who started a fire in the woollen hall," said a third.

"It wasn't," a man said on his other side, with assurance. "It was some demon they've been keeping in the bath-house. A soldier told me."

"Ooh," said all the women together; and after the mention of soldiers, they said not a word more.

"What sort of demon?" asked Tamu boldly.

"Some fire demon. Something they were fighting against up north. Those Vonn brought it back here with them, that's what I heard. They should have kept it safer."

"They should," said Tamu, slightly aghast, and then he too stayed quiet until they reached the fire-ravaged area. But his mind was busy. A fire demon? That had to mean a darkburn. He had no idea that any had been brought back to the city – let alone kept underneath its walls. Knowing the geography of the city, he understood immediately why the northern bath-house might be employed to house the thing.

But how had it got loose? Although he had never seen a darkburn, his researches into the lore around them told him that it would be an extremely dangerous thing to attempt to keep imprisoned. And an even more dangerous thing to let escape.

But somebody had done so. He felt a little sick, and assured himself that it could not be the Vonn. It was far likelier to be the Kelvhan army, since they had control over everything and everyone that came in through the city gates. Not the Vonn.

By now they had reached the border of the burnt part of the city. And a border it was: the fire seemed to have created a new land within the city, a land of desolate streets of ash and smoking, skeletal remains of buildings. Outside them forlorn women crouched weeping, while old men were sitting slumped amidst the ashes. One sifted them through his fingers: and Tamu's theoretical pity grew real.

This was a horror, and it made him shiver in sympathy. How many had died here? How many were homeless? His idea that things could not have been much worse for people here was very wrong. The castle would have to step in and offer help; he wondered what form it would take. They would need shelters, food, clean water, eventually a rebuilding on a giant scale. The castle lords would not pay readily for such a massive effort, not in this quarter.



Walking on, however, he found the buildings further north again were not so thoroughly destroyed. Many buildings still stood here, some almost intact: and the ground was wet, thick with sodden ash which surprised him by its quantity. How had people managed to get so much water on to the fires? Perhaps they had siphoned it from the river.

The crowd of onlookers had thinned a little, many having turned aside to help the inhabitants. Tamu hurried along the ashy sludge of Old Tanneries Street to find his favourite bookshop down at the far end.

When he arrived he was saddened to see that the shop had not fared well. Although the frontage stood, the inside had largely been burnt out. The old man who kept the shop was in there, stooping amongst piles of blackened books, picking over the charred and shrivelled remnants of his stock.

"Here," said Tamu, going up to him. "Let me help you."

The old man looked up with a glance of dazed recognition, and nodded. He was moving books automatically, without purpose, stunned by his losses. Where the books were not burnt they were largely sodden. Tamu began to go through a box of wet but unburnt volumes, standing them up to dry upon any surface he could find.

"There's no point," said the bookseller. He was almost in tears. Tamu found the little kettle – sooty but still with spiced tea inside it – and made him sit down upon a pile of books to drink some. He patted the man's shoulder but could think of nothing to say. Then he resumed his sorting, although the books he rescued were, he knew well, next to worthless in their wet condition. Even once dry the pages that had not stuck together would be crinkled, their ink blurred.

Nevertheless he emptied the box and started on another crate which had been stored on a higher shelf and had escaped the mysterious influx of water. He sighed as he went through the pile. Not much there worth saving, either, although a parcel of old manuscripts tied up in string caught his eye when he unfolded them. They were in an early Kelvhan hand – probably genuine, since they appeared to be only old inventories and accounts, which would not have been worth the trouble of forging.

Tamu picked them up and went over to the listless shopkeeper.

"I'll give you thirty drebs for this bundle," he said. It was most of what he had in his purse, and far more than the manuscripts were worth; but thirty drebs would keep the shopkeeper fed for a few days.

He could do no more. So after a little while he left the shop with the papers tucked into his tunic, and wandered back up the street. He saw that a crowd of a couple of hundred people, mainly men, some beggarly, had gathered outside one of the few unburnt buildings: its plain stone frontage stood out from the charred wooden frames of those on either side. Its tiled roof was still in place. Its closed door was blackened but intact.

"Borgun! Borgun! Help us!" came a call from one ragged man in the waiting crowd; and other voices joined in, pleading. "Borgun! Speak to us! Show us your face!"

So this must be the Temple of Borgun, of which Tamu had often heard, although he had never realised that it stood exactly here. Nothing about the unadorned building announced its status.

Nearer to him a man began shouting furiously against the pleas: "They did this! It's their demon did this! They're demon-worshippers in there!"

Then more of those around him took up the same cry.

"Demon-worshippers!"

"Come out, you deformed devils! This is all your fault!"

And with that the crowd began to surge towards the building. Tamu tried to detach himself, but he was carried along by the mass of people. To his alarm, for a few seconds his feet were lifted from the ground as if by a great wave. He battled to get free, without success – for he was trapped.

To his relief, the surge soon halted amidst more shouts and yells. Peering between the heads, Tamu saw a bearded man in long, blue, priestly robes being dragged out of the temple.

“Kill him! Kill him!” yelled the angry man in front of him. “He’s the one who worships the demon! He’s the one who did this! He’s got it hidden inside there. This is the only building that’s not been touched by fire – that proves it’s sorcery.”

“We ought to rip the place down!” yelled another voice. But there were answering shouts of protest too.

“It wasn’t that priest! He gave us shelter from the flames. It was those foreigners – those Vonn – they brought the fire demon here from the barbarian lands up north.”

And with another frightening surge the crowd, roaring its agreement or otherwise, moved forward again. Tamu renewed his struggles against the tide, but it was inexorable. Those around him seemed ready to attack – somebody, anybody, whom they could blame for the destruction.

“Stand back.”

That was a voice of command. As it spoke the crowd hesitated: those behind him were still pushing forward, while those at the front were now trying to push back. As his view past the throng of heads opened up, Tamu saw the scarred chief of the Vonn facing the struggling crowd. Huldarion. He did not look afraid. He looked as stern and cold as always.

On either side of him stood a Rider with drawn sword. Tamu realised with a tremendous flutter of fear and joy that one of them was Parthenal. He did not raise his sword in threat but merely stood with it poised and ready in both hands like an avenging angel. The older man on the other side – less angel-like – now did the same.

“Borgun! Borgun!” came the chant from the far side of the crowd.

“I am not Borgun,” said the scarred man, unmoved and unmoving. “I am Huldarion, the chieftain of the Vonn. I have nothing to do with this temple, nor this priest, yet I believe him to be innocent of any fire-raising.”

“Prove it!” yelled the man in front of Tamu once again, pushing forward and trying to start another surge all on his own. But this time the crowd resisted.

“Stand back, I beg you,” said Huldarion more gently but still with authority. “I understand your fear and horror at the devastation that this fire has caused. But if it was indeed started by the thing you call a demon – and which I call a darkburn – I can assure that it was not by our doing, nor by this priest’s. This is not my land, nor are you my people, yet I never would endanger you by bringing a darkburn within your city walls. I have fought the things too often – and have seen too many of my soldiers killed and burnt by them – for me to contemplate such an act.”

“Who did, then?” yelled out a voice from the crowd.

“That you would have to ask your own commanders. But this temple has nothing to do with darkburns or such demons. It survived the fire because it’s built of stone: as did your city walls.”

“You’re in league with that priest, that devil-worshipper!”

“I have never seen the priest before today,” said Huldarion calmly. “But as I understand, the Borgun whom he reveres was merely an ordinary man, and not a burning creature made of fire.” As the crowd murmured he raised his voice. “The darkburns are bred and used by

Kelvha's enemies to the east. They are my enemies too, for they gave me these scars. And they have long threatened my own city of Caervonn and the realm of which I am the rightful king."

They all fell silent now. Tamu thought that the word *king* had an almost magical effect upon them. He suspected that Huldarion made use of that effect, just as he knew the effect of his scars: they made people stop, and look, and listen, and maybe fear. Now, in the silence, Huldarion spoke out strongly.

"I have made it my mission to destroy the darkburns that menace all our lands, and to defeat those who use them as cruel weapons of war. That is a main part of my purpose in being here in your great city: for the Vonn are few, and only with the help of your own valiant soldiers can we hope to succeed. But by the grace of your High Prince, and the High Lord Post-Regent, together we will rid the land of darkburns."

There was a ragged cheer.

"Speaks well, don't he?" said one man behind Tamu.

"Ask our own commanders how it happened, he says," muttered another. "When could we ever trust them to tell us the truth?"

"My Lord," said Huldarion, "I owe you the deepest gratitude for your support." And now Tamu saw between the heads filling his view the bulky figure of Nerogun striding up with a small retinue of soldiers. Anxiety and foreboding filled Tamu although he could not have spelt out why. He only knew that Nerogun had meant ill to Parthenal, and feared lest he meant ill to all the Vonn.

Huldarion bowed to the approaching Post-Regent, a bow low enough to be respectful, yet slight enough to show he was no lackey. Nerogun merely nodded in his turn.

"No doubt the Captain of the Vonn speaks truth," he said in his ponderous, resonant voice. "This lowly priest is ignorant of the high matters of war. In the battles which we lately fought, and won, against our enemies in the north, one of their fire-demons was indeed taken captive. It was kept for study – not within the city, but underneath the walls, encased in stone. There it should have been secure. The only ones with access to it were myself, the High Lord Marshall Shargun, and the Keeper of the Keys."

He paused, while Tamu – and probably others – assessed the omission of *The High Lord* from that title.

"I am extremely angry," Nerogun said levelly, "that such damage has been inflicted on my loyal citizens. There will be a full investigation. Meanwhile, bread rations will be immediately supplied to all those who have lost their homes."

There was another murmur through the audience, part appreciative, part disgruntled. But the disgruntled part was careful not to be too loud. In any case Nerogun took no notice as he continued.

"The Lord Huldarion is right in saying that this threat wielded by our enemies will not be stopped without the force and courage of the Kelvhan army. Decisive action cannot come too swiftly. I know I speak with the assent of the High Prince when I tell you we should ride out to fight these foreign monsters as soon as possible."

The soldiers around raised their swords in unison: the more astute members of the crowd shouted a *Hurrah!* Tamu, watching Parthenal, saw how his lips curved in a faintly sardonic smile as he raised his own sword in the air for a moment before he gracefully sheathed it.

Nerogun nodded to his soldiers, who led a horse over to him. Once he had mounted and departed with his retinue, Huldarion too strode away with his men. Parthenal was soon out of sight, and the scene lost its vividness for Tamu.

The crowd began to break up, talking about Huldarion's scars and how soon the bread would be delivered. Tamu moved reluctantly along with them until he was able to push his way free.

Then he wandered home towards the castle, caught in a dream in which he rode out to distant battle alongside the Vonn – somehow acquiring great skills with a sword and saving Parthenal's life along the way. He knew it was ridiculous. It was a poor attempt to fill the yawning gap within his life: the gap that could never be admitted to another person.

When he returned to the Scriptorium at noon only two of the scribes had turned up and were waiting by the door. Unlocking it, Tamu reflected as he entered that nobody cared for the Scriptorium and its archives as he did. This was his home, his centre, his chief comfort, his own realm: this desk surrounded by the dusty laden shelves. The smell of gall-ink and old parchments. This was where he belonged.

Soon the Vonn would leave, riding out into their own bright, wild, perilous world; and Parthenal would disappear for ever from the castle, to leave only the diminishing wash of a golden memory as a boat leaves its fading trace across the sea.

There was nothing to be done about it. This was his life, and the best one that he could hope for. With a sigh Tamu took the smoky-smelling roll of manuscript from underneath his tunic, laid it out across his desk, and set himself to study.

## Chapter 37

"I came to consult with your herb-mistress, if I may," said Yaret, with a slightly clumsy bow. "I find my leg is paining me."

"I am sorry to hear that. Of course you may see her," said Meya immediately. "Let me take you to the sickroom. I'll send my maid to fetch Boral – my herb-mistress – and she will find us there."

Meya had been wondering how she was to get news about Janeya. She had even contemplated sending her maid Eral to the Vonn women's lodgings on some concocted errand, risky though that would have been. So it was a relief to see Yaret, even if the woman was not a true member of the Vonn.

She assumed that Yaret's leg was merely a pretext for this visit. Certainly her limp was hardly noticeable as they commenced the long walk through the winding passages of the castle. The smell of smoke still hung in the air: Meya had been busy all day instructing servants in the removal of the dust of ash. It would be an annoyingly long job.

But Yaret – perhaps wary of stray listeners, and probably rightly so – said nothing about the fires or anything else, until Meya apologised for the castle's smoky atmosphere.

"Even from so far away the after-effects have reached us. I understand the Vonn assisted in the rescue of inhabitants?" she said.

"Yes, so I believe," said Yaret in her careful Kelvhan. "I did not see the result of the fire until this morning, when I visited the northern quarter; and very depressing it was. I spent some time helping people to clear their houses. But in many cases little could be saved." Yaret stared into space as if seeing something other than the plain stone walls.

"Bread is to be provided to them," Meya reassured her.

"And other aid?"

Meya shrugged. "We cannot afford to rebuild every house that a careless citizen sets alight. There would be no end to it."

After a small silence Yaret said cautiously, "I understood that the cause might possibly have been arson."

"Really? I can't say I'm surprised, in that part of the city."

Another silence for several paces. "Will you visit the quarter?"

"Perhaps," said Meya, although she had not even considered this. She was not sure why she would want to visit, or what she could do there; her role lay within the castle.

Yaret gazed ahead again. Meya thought she was judging some comment, weighing her words before she spoke; but in the end all she came out with was, "I trust you stay in good health, Lady Meya."

"I am well, I thank you," answered Meya. "I am always well."

"You are fortunate."

"Yes. Except that I am known for being well. It gives me no chance to retire to my chamber on the grounds of illness."

Yaret smiled. "Then you are unlike some," she said, "who stay in their room all day, although they are perfectly healthy. I know of one such. No, two."

Meya took this as a guarded reference to Janeya and her maid Piril, and relaxed a little.

"But they cannot stay there for ever, I suppose," she said.

"No. Eventually they must depart. Speaking of which, soon we are to take our leave of the castle – and of your hospitality – and ride out with the Kelvhan army."

"How soon?"

"Maybe no more than three days from now, as I understand. It seems quite sudden but we are all prepared. We have sufficient gear. So we shall all leave together." Was there the faintest emphasis on the "all"?

They had now arrived at the sickroom, and Meya saw Boral hurrying along the arched corridor towards them with her head down, looking anxious as she always did. Meya longed to tell her to Lift her head! Square her shoulders! Look people in the eye! But she restrained herself, for she seldom spoke her exasperation aloud.

Being a servant, she thought as she waited for Boral, is probably harder than I imagine. I presume it would be fairly easy, but then I am an organised person. The inner life of a servant is almost as hard for me to imagine as is that of an inhabitant of the northern quarter. Of course, nobody has to live there if they work hard enough. All the same, I would not want to.

And as for riding out as a soldier with the Vonn, as Yaret will soon do... well, I would only be a liability. None the less, I should like to do something – to go to the battlefield, to be near while they fight, to support my husband. My husband!

The idea of the battle shocked her less than the fact that she had automatically thought of Huldarion as her husband. She felt caught out. But unless he died in battle, she had pledged herself to him unshakeably.

Opening the door to the sick-room Meya looked at the neat white bed within. The notion came to her that she ought to visit Huldarion's bed before the armies left to fight; to offer him at least that comfort. It was her duty. She dismissed the thought that it might also be a pleasure.

"If you permit, may I see your leg, my lady Yaret?" asked Boral.

Yaret laughed. "I am no lady, but a common archer," she said, sitting on the bed and prising off her boot. "You could call me Miss, I suppose."

"Yes, Miss. How long is it since this injury happened?" Boral showed no surprise at the sight of the truncated limb. But Meya was shocked, not only by the sight of the stump itself – which looked somewhat red and raw – but by the violence with which the foot must have been hacked off.

"Last autumn," Yaret said, quite calmly. "It was a stoneman's axe."

"And then, Miss, I hear the stoneman pushed you down a chasm, did he not," enquired Boral, "so that you fell two hundred feet into a river? And then you had to swim out and bind up your leg without aid, by yourself? And wait overnight to be rescued?"

Yaret looked as astonished as Meya felt. "More or less," she said. "I didn't have to swim, though, just scramble to the shore. But who told you all that?"

"My sister is a junior housekeeper of the Lord Melegan's household. She was present while the Lady Tiburé was talking to her daughter about the matter. You must forgive her curiosity, but she was not asked to leave the room."

"Her curiosity is natural," said Yaret politely.

Boral turned to Meya and curtseyed. "My lady, my sister sends her humble compliments, and asks if perhaps employment might be found for her here, within the castle."

"What? Why does she want to move?" asked Meya, feeling somewhat bewildered by so many strange developments all at once.

"My lady, word goes round that Lord Melegan's household may soon be... diminished."

"It's the first I've heard of it," said Meya. But she immediately thought of Gaelera's words in the courtyard as they stood beside the crumpled body that had fallen from the Tell Tower. *A weakness in the family...*

Well, there was no weakness in Nerogun. He must have moved fast.

And once Nerogun took against him, Melegan would have to leave his palatial quarters just outside the castle. He would have to leave the city altogether: it would mean exile to Outer Kelvha at the least. She did not feel much pity for Melegan, who was a pompous bore; but she felt sorry for Shildha, his pretty, harmless wife.

And her own daughter, Aliya, was staying on a country estate that belonged to a relative of Melegan's. It might be wise, though inconvenient, to move her.

Then Meya felt a rush of guilt – for was not this, ultimately, her own doing? Was it not a result of her cover-up of Janeya's supposed suicide? The corpse of poor Felipa was to be buried tomorrow, with all the ceremony due to one of Janeya's rank. Meanwhile Janeya herself had to get out of the city, or be got out somehow.

"You female Riders," she said. "Will you all ride out? Will any stay behind?"

"All will ride, without exception," answered Yaret, and then winced as Boral began to apply a tincture to her stump. "That stings!"

"It stings because the skin is broken. You have not been looking after it," said Boral in reproof, and added as an afterthought, "my lady. I mean Miss."

"I did have some cream to put on it, but it ran out a while ago."

"Then why didn't you obtain some more?"

Yaret looked embarrassed. "Well, there are no shops on the battlefield. And... I don't have much money to buy medications."

Boral compressed her lips. "I'll find you something that will help. Wait here while I go up to the still-room." She hurried out.

"She can be quite strict, can't she?" said Yaret, gazing after her.

"She has never been strict with me."

Yaret smiled. "No, I expect not. But then you are always well."

"You yourself look tired," said Meya, studying her more closely.

"Ah, that's only because we have a lot to do just now. We have some volunteers who have lately joined our forces, so there have been plenty of things to sort out in the way of horses and equipment."

Meya thought this might be another veiled reference to Janeya and her maid. "Will your volunteers be willing to fight, do you think?"

Yaret considered this. "I think so. One of them at least. Of course they may just wish to travel. They have nothing to keep them in Kelvha."

Meya imagined Janeya prancing around in armour, riding off to battle... Yes, the girl would probably love that, she thought sardonically. Sina would be jealous if she knew: that foolish girl had already expressed a wish to leave the city with Durba, dressed as a boy. It was nonsense, of course, for Sina would never have the courage nor the confidence to do such a daring thing.

However, it was true that, since meeting Durba, both Sina's courage and her confidence had grown... An unsettling thought.

"How big will your army be, in all?" she asked, in order to leave the subject.

"Kelvha have promised, I believe, twenty thousand men. They are most generous with their support," Yaret said formally, as if the walls were listening. Which they might be, even here, reflected Meya; for she could not check every corridor and room for newly-added spyholes as she could in her own chambers. "As for the Vonn – I'm not quite sure. I think there are around two thousand active Riders encamped elsewhere, but I don't know how many will join Huldarion once he rides out of Kelvha."

"You have not been with the Vonn for long, I think."

"No. We were thrown together by accident while I was travelling. I'm a pedlar of woven goods and I met them on my route. But I have vowed to represent my townspeople in the fight against the stonemen."

"Why you?"

"Oh... just accident, again. I volunteered to come since I had already encountered stonemen and knew what to expect."

Meya thought it odd that none of the men from her home had accompanied her to war. Perhaps it was too far away for them to care.

"What sort of place is your town?" she asked, genuinely curious. She found herself drawn to this woman who, though she had neither the beauty nor the adornments that were expected of Kelvhan gentlewomen, yet possessed a quiet, thoughtful assurance. And presumably some degree of courage and resilience, given the leg. It was a pity she was so low-born.

Yaret did not answer immediately. Once again she seemed to be gazing into the middle distance, as if considering what to say. It occurred to Meya that it might not be spyholes that she was wary of, so much as Meya herself.

But before either of them could say anything, Boral came hurrying back in. She had a jar in her hand and a worried – no, a scared – appearance on her face.

"What is it?" said Meya sharply. For some reason her mind flew to the still-room, to the flask that still stood on a dusty shelf, disguised by the proximity of so many other, similar flasks. Boral had lately confirmed what Meya had suspected: that the Prince's Weldish wine had been laced with the same nameless ingredient as the stonemen's drugs. That must be through the will of Nerogun. The flask had weighed heavy on her mind until Janeya had provided a counterweight that was much heavier. Now she feared discovery.

But Boral said breathlessly, "There is some disturbance in the armoury yard, my lady. I saw it from the still-room window."

She breathed more easily. "What do you mean? What sort of a disturbance?"

"My lady, there are soldiers out there, a whole troop of the castle guard," said Boral, her voice unusually high with agitation. "I think – well, I couldn't hear it all, but there was a lot of shouting, about injustice, I think, and cruel punishment – and they are armed, my lady! They are armed, and they are demanding to see the Prince!" She clasped the jar tightly between both hands.

"Soldiers? Mutiny?"

This was something altogether new. Now that Meya knew it was not about the flask, her confidence returned to her.

"I had better go and see," she said.

She marched out of the sick-room and hurried to the stairs. She had always been able to quell the fractious grumblings of the servants – it took little more than a stern word and a sterner look – and did not doubt that this task of quelling soldiers would not be much harder. They would not dare to contradict her, such a lofty and authoritative lady of the castle. She knew the effect she had on the lower orders.

The two other women were following her at a short distance as she ran swiftly down the stairs. She did not stop to wait for them at the bottom of the stairwell but strode on through the cloister to the Armoury yard.

And then, on the point of entering the yard, Meya saw the soldiers. Suddenly she realised that this was a very different matter to a handful of discontented servants. She stepped back underneath the arches and stood on Boral's foot.



"This is dangerous," she said to the two women quietly. How had she thought that she could quell this situation with a stern word and a look?

Two dozen soldiers of the fifteenth regiment were standing in the middle of the square. They were in formal ranks, all with swords held up before them. At their head was a man she recognised: the captain Amerrun. He had been promoted by her late husband and was, she knew, a capable and well-respected soldier.

And loyal – or so she had thought. Yet around him lay the scattered bodies of three of the palace guard; and Amerrun's sword was bloody.

Behind him, in the middle of his troop, two or three of his men were shouting half-coherently – something about cruel punishment – while Amerrun tried forcefully to speak over them. His tone was more measured than his men's but the import was the same.

"My Lord, we do not accept your judgement. We demand to see the High Prince! He is our highest judge and arbiter. My Lord Nerogun, your condemnation of my troop is both unmerited and unjust–"

"You didn't need to order our men killed!" shouted the man behind him. "We are not cattle!"

"No, you are less than cattle!" bellowed a powerful voice; and Meya saw Nerogun standing like an angry bull at the entrance to the armoury.

Now he marched out into the open. Beside him stood Iajo, holding a mace and swinging a chain, and flanked by more of the palace guard – who were armed with spears and halberds as well as swords. Meya took another step back into the shadow of the stairwell.

"My lord, my men have served you long and faithfully–" began Amerrun.

"Faithfully? When four of them let our most precious prisoner be stolen from us?"

"My lord, the thing was an unnatural creature, whose powers were–"

"Be quiet! I have spoken!" Nerogun gestured to Iajo, who raised his mace and stepped forward threateningly.

But at the same time, there was sudden movement on the far side of the yard. The High Prince Faldron came striding in flanked by footmen. He was followed by Huldarion and two of his Vonnish counsellors, one of them one carrying rolled-up documents.

"What is all this? We have been trying to consult together and this rumpus has disturbed us. What's going on here?" Faldron demanded, with considerably more authority than Meya had heard in his voice before. "Nerogun? What are these troops doing in the castle? What is the problem?"

"Your Highness, the problem is these mutinous and incompetent excuses for soldiery," said Nerogun with furious contempt.

"But these are men of the Fifteenth," objected Faldron, as he strode up to Nerogun and turned to survey the ranks of soldiers. "I fought beside them at the Outland Forts. What has gone wrong?"

"Your Highness, regrettably the sheer insubordination of–"

Amerrun's voice was raised over the Post-Regent's. "Your Highness, I and my men have been falsely accused of treachery, and threatened with death without trial, without court-martial, without even the opportunity to plead to you for mercy, as our highest commander – which I do now." He went down on his knees.

"Get up," said Nerogun, his voice full of scorn. "Your Highness, I am sure you will agree with me when I say that mutiny cannot go unpunished." He raised his arm to Iajo.

"Wait," said Faldron. "You have no right to execute these men without my being informed."

"I am informing you now."

"And without my assent," said Faldron. Meya was taken aback by his decisive tone. Was this the frivolous youth she had observed drinking away his evenings? He was sober enough now.

Nerogun too looked taken aback. "Your Highness, I have your safety and well-being foremost in my mind!"

"So do I," said Faldron. "Captain. You may speak."

The man on his knees said, his voice almost on the point of breaking, "Sir, four of my men have been already put to death for their supposed failure to guard the fire-demon imprisoned by the northern wall."

"The darkburn that got out and caused such devastation in the city," Faldron said. "That was a grievous error indeed."

"But it was not their fault!" cried a man from within the troop.

"Of course it was," said Nerogun. "Their fault or their treachery."

Faldron put up a hand to silence him. Nerogun's mouth opened and closed again, in some astonishment.

"Captain Amerrun. Go on."

"Sire. My men were truly dismayed to find the darkburn had escaped. They could not explain it except by magic arts."

"Such nonsense," growled Nerogun. "They are cowardly traitors!"

Meya found herself confused by what happened next. There was a clatter and a shout: then a soldier was running out of the troop with upraised sword, charging at the Post-Regent.

The captain got quickly to his feet. Iajo had already begun to run over, brandishing his heavy mace: but one of the Vonnish councillors – Solon, it was – moved more quickly than either. Before Meya had blinked he had drawn his sword and struck the soldier down; not with the blade, but with the head of the hilt.

The man sprawled writhing on the floor. Iajo rushed up and glowered over him: it seemed as if he would have smashed the man's head with his mace had not Solon still been standing over him.

"This is an outrage!" bellowed Nerogun. "The whole lot of them should be hung from the city walls!"

"Wait," said Faldron, his hand lifted again. "Thank you, Solon. Iajo, you may step back now. The man seems to have been dealt with adequately for the moment." He waited while Iajo and Solon returned to their former posts: Solon with a glance at his companion Thoronal – who had stood stock-still throughout – and Iajo sneering.

Then the Prince resumed. "This darkburn. I don't have the full story. Captain Amerrun, you just said you saw it escape into the city."

"No, sir, I did not. Nobody saw it leave, nobody saw it get into the city. When we arrived to change the guard, it was simply gone. Vanished. We do not understand how, for all the locks were fastened and secure."

"In that case, how can we be certain that the darkburn caused the fires?" asked Huldarion slowly. At once Meya knew that he did not like to ask the question in case it caused offence; but she also saw his deep concern about the answer.

"What else could it have been?" snapped Nerogun. "The fierceness and number of the fires – the speed with which they spread, leaping from roof to roof – that surely leaves no room for doubt."

Yet Huldarion's doubt, she saw, was only increased. The line between his brows deepened as he repeated, "Spreading from roof to roof?"

"It was the darkburn. Deliberately let loose by soldiers of this regiment – who had probably been bribed by the Keeper of the Keys."

"Really? I don't believe that Melegan would do such a thing," said Faldron. "And I don't really know why you wanted the darkburn kept inside the city wall at all. See what it has led to." He tapped his foot. "Huldarion. You have experience of darkburns. Can you explain its disappearance by any means but treachery?"

"I cannot," said Huldarion in a low voice.

"The Keeper of the Keys—" began Nerogun.

"Enough," said Faldron. Nerogun looked astounded. Faldron surveyed the soldiers, and tapped his foot some more.

Everybody else was silent; even Nerogun, who chewed his lip sullenly. Meya found that she did not know how to read this royal youth who had suddenly, almost overnight, developed a questioning mind and possibly even a conscience, both traits markedly absent in the High Prince until now.

"Hmm. Well, Huldarion, what do you think I should do with these supposed traitors?" he asked at last.

"In that I cannot advise your Highness," said Huldarion.

"Try," said Faldron.

And Meya realised on hearing that one word that the new Faldron was possibly a dangerous man – or at least one not to be discounted – and that Huldarion, no matter what he said in answer, was bound to displease either the High Prince or the glowering Post-Regent. Nerogun wanted the men summarily executed; Faldron, it seemed, did not.

Huldarion paused, considering; and in the pause somebody edged past Meya and walked out into the centre of the yard.

"What?" said Meya, but it was too late to tell her to come back.

"Who are you?" barked Nerogun.

"My lord, I am Yaretkoro Thuleikand of Obandiro in the north, and I fought beside you in the Outlands."

Faldron cocked his head at her. "You're that northern archer," he said. "I remember. You spoke up for the loben traitors, no?"

"Sire." Yaret bowed.

"So now you're going to speak up for these traitors who are in league with the darkburn," said Faldron, with a trace of his old jesting manner. "Make a habit of it, do you?"

"Not normally, sire. I do not know these men. But I do know darkburns." Yaret spoke in a low voice, and Meya thought it very likely that Faldron and Nerogun both took her for a man. That was fortunate. Huldarion, on the other hand, was gazing hard at her with his brow creased.

"And what do you know about them?" asked Faldron.

"Sire, a darkburn cannot talk. It cannot be in league with anyone. All it can do is burn. And while it cannot burn through iron, it seems it can, in certain circumstances, burn through earth. If your prison was built on earth foundations – especially damp and loose or peaty ones – it is possible it could have burnt its way out through the floor. Earth subsiding into the gap would mean that there is little trace."

"Have you seen this happen?" demanded Faldron.

"Sire, on my travels in the north I encountered a darkburn that had been trapped inside a pit too deep for it to climb out of. The next morning it was gone although the earth inside the pit still steamed. When I investigated I found an especially hot patch of looser earth in the pit wall. I surmised that it had escaped by tunnelling."

"And where did it come out?" asked Faldron, intrigued; although Solon's eyes had narrowed slightly as he gazed at Yaret.

"I don't know the exact spot, sire, but I saw the darkburn about half a mile away. At least, it looked like the same one."

"Hah! That bath-house is built over drains," commented Faldron. "Wet earth. You were a fool to keep it there, Nerogun."

"And these men were greater fools not to guard it properly!" burst out the Post-Regent.

Faldron turned to look at the Captain and his men consideringly.

"I suppose, archer, you would have me pardon these men as I pardoned those Iobens in the north," he said.

"Sire, as I said, I know nothing of these men," said Yaret submissively. "Their fate lies in your hands. But, in the same way as those Iobens, they might be more useful dying on the battlefield than being slaughtered now."

Faldron laughed. "I like that. Yes, more useful indeed. Captain Amerrun? You will be deprived of your arms and rank and escorted to your barracks. You and your men will there be kept under close guard and not allowed to leave until it is time for the army to ride out. Only on the verge of battle will your weapons be returned to you. If you fight valiantly for Kelvha – and survive – then your cases may be reconsidered. Do you understand?"

The captain bowed his head.

"I thank you, sire, for your justness and your mercy," he said, his voice husky. Then he stood up, offering his sword to the palace guardsman who stepped up to formally arrest him. As the men were led away, more quietly than they had arrived, Faldron turned back to Yaret.

"Just what are you doing here in the castle, archer?"

"That's what I would like to know as well," said Nerogun. Faldron pointedly ignored him.

"This archer came with my consent to consult my herb-mistress about medicines," said Meya, stalking forward. It was a very late intervention, she thought, but the only effective one she could have made. If she had pleaded for the Captain's life she would have been dismissed as a hysterical female. Yet the Prince had listened to a low-born archer!

She was annoyed – with everyone. None the less she needed to back Yaret up. The deferential presence of her herb-mistress behind her confirmed her story so effectively that Faldron merely nodded and dismissed them with a curt gesture.

Not so Huldarion. He was looking them over with a sombre, considering stare. Although his gaze was as impassive as always, Meya was sure that he did not care for much of what had just passed. She dropped him an unsmiling curtsy and glided away with Yaret limping behind her.

Neither uttered a word. Not until they were crossing the inner courtyard – and even Boral was well out of earshot – did Meya ask Yaret quietly,

"Was that true, about the darkburns? That they can burn their way through earth?"

"No," Yaret responded in an equally quiet murmur. "No, I lied."

## *Chapter 38*

The female Riders now had an extra horse, thanks to Yaret, who had somehow cajoled a small, tetchy hack out of the stable-master. It would do for Piril, although Maeneb thought that personally she would not go near the animal. Janeya would ride Yaret's scruffy little pack-horse Helba, because the fine-looking Poda would draw too much attention to her.

Each new arrival had a sword, also thanks to Yaret who had managed to purchase two short, light swords from somewhere or other. Where, she had not said, and Maeneb had not cared enough to ask. The new recruits had borrowed clothing from the female Riders; dun-coloured breeches and tunics, shapeless and unflattering. Not that that mattered. Indeed, it was preferable that nothing about the two should catch the eye.

Delgeb and the other women had been informed of their identity – in part. The story they were spun had almost worked. Yaret had told them that the Kelvhan arrivals were both maid-servants of the dead Janeya, who were fleeing punishment although they had done nothing wrong. The true Janeya wore her hair in tight, unattractive braids and kept her head down: she was so changed from the joyous girl of the evening in the music room that hardly any of the women Riders recognised her.

Delgeb was the exception. On seeing her, she named the girl at once. But after some grumbling, she had agreed that Janeya and Piril could join the female Riders' forces, at least until they had all left Inner Kelvha; and that Huldarion would not be told.

Maeneb doubted if either girl would linger with the Riders after they were safely out of Kelvha City – let alone get as far as joining battle. All the same, for their disguise to be more fully effective, it had been decided that they could do with some sort of armour. Although chain mail was expensive, either leather or lightweight plate would do.

So now Maeneb was trawling the eastern market for cheap armour – a job she disliked, yet had volunteered for, because it got her out of her now over-crowded lodgings. Not that the market was any better. It was just a different set of voices.

There are too many people everywhere, she thought with distaste and dismay as she picked a way between the crowded stalls. And so much watching of each other! So much planning to defraud, and fleece, and rob!

That was how she interpreted their busy minds, at least: the complex interlacing patterns made a net of unspoken wishing and intent. It reminded her strangely of the Farwth – that impenetrable, intertwining mass of stems and trunks and leaves and reaching tendrils. There were plenty of tendrils here too, in the market, largely reaching towards money.

The northern quarter would have been a cheaper place to seek her wares but all the markets there were closed. Here, in the eastern quarter, the markets were still functioning normally regardless of the smoke that hung in the air like a grim reminder of the fire. The prosperous east did not care about what happened in the poverty-stricken north. Those shattered streets, with their pitiable denizens... Her mind sought for Leor whom she had last seen there on that dreadful evening, and did not find him. So he must be still shielding himself.

And that was because of Adon – who according to Leor had set the fires burning. She presumed that Leor had by now informed Huldarion of Adon's involvement. She herself had not spoken to Huldarion for several days; and was thankful not to see him, with her new and guilty knowledge of the two concealed women. It was a secret and a task that she would rather not have had.

As she strolled amongst the stalls, against the stream of city-dwellers, she knew that she was being watched. It must be obvious to the stall-holders that she was a member of the Vonn. What was less clear was whether this was an advantage to her.

On the one hand, she was regarded as prey, being innocent in the ways of Kelvhan markets, and a foolish female to boot; on the other hand, she detected in the close-knit web of thought a surprising amount of interest, and even of respect – amongst the women stall-holders at any rate.

Perhaps they envied her her freedom, for despite her male garb Maeneb did not attempt to conceal her gender. That had seldom worked for her. Unlike Durba or Yaret, she didn't have a face and figure that could readily pass as a young man's. So she drew curious glances from those around her, although the shopkeepers – even the male ones – were uniformly courteous.

"How much for this one?" she asked the owner of a chainware store, a barrel of a man surrounded by bowed rails of flopping armour like so many sad hanging headless corpses.

"Eight drebs, si...." He began to say *sir*, and then, not knowing whether to switch to saying *ma'am*, stopped altogether.

"Hmph. That seems a lot." She put the corselet back on the rail. It was a pity Janeya hadn't thought to smuggle a few hundred drebs out of her castle quarters. But she had arrived with nothing at all but tears, which showed no sign of being quenched. The girl was determined to grieve, and Maeneb was finding it quite tiresome.

"Does anywhere round here sell leather armour?" she asked the shopkeeper.

He was torn between amusement and surprise. "Not here. What good is leather armour? You might have found some in the northern quarter, up on Old Tanneries Row, but..." He sobered rapidly and shook his head. "Not now. A bad business. Those fire demons..."

"Darkburns," Maeneb said. "Yes. They are hotter than you could imagine."

A young man surveying a nearby rail of hauberks looked up at her and laughed. "You'd know, would you?"

"I have fought them."

"Fought them? Really? It's true what they say about you Vonn women, then? I'd like to see you in a battle. Women fight like cats, all hiss and scratches."

She did not bother to reply to this. But her aloofness only seemed to encourage him. He took a step closer.

"I'll bet you fight like a cat in bed as well." He looked her up and down. "You shouldn't be dressing up in leather armour, and going out to fight, my girl. You're too pretty for that. You should be in silk and lace in some man's bed. I'd have you in my bed any day."

The shopkeeper glanced at him sidelong, but did not intervene. The young man was fashionably dressed – pointed boots, gold shoulder tassels, red-gold hair, and a neat gold beard on his pointed chin: probably nobility. Better stay polite.

"Thank you sir," she said, "but I prefer my life."

He stared at her in theatrical incredulity. "A life spent in breeches on a horse? Waving your toy sword around?" He gestured at the long knife which hung, as always, from her belt. "You're taking a man's place, don't you know that? Or maybe those Vonn aren't man enough to tell you so."

"I take no-one's place," she said with dignity. "I am merely one of many women in their army."

"Too many, if you ask me."

She couldn't resist. "I didn't ask you," she said, and added as an afterthought, "sir."

The stare became colder. "Do you know who I am?"

"How could I? Sir." She was aware that the silent shopkeeper was now definitely alarmed. His heavy mind was becoming agitated; so she turned to him and said, "Thank you for your help," before she walked away.

It was a pity about the leather armour. Perhaps she could return here later on and haggle for the chain-mail, if she found nothing cheaper....

However, some yards further down the street she saw the glint of plate. As she approached, a row of little suns shone down at her from the high wooden frame: breastplates and cuirasses, and the smaller crescent moons of thigh protectors. They were unnecessarily ornate and when she reached up to touch one, the plate metal was too thin to be effective. These were ornamental, not intended for serious use.

But they would be light. And thin and ineffective armour would not matter if the two women never got as far as battle. Janeya and the maid were bound to disappear as soon as they left Inner Kelvha. So these accoutrements might do.

When Maeneb peered into the shop hoping to haggle with the owner, there was no-one to be seen. So she wandered round to the back: a narrow alcove between wooden walls, that held more plate armour, but plain and unadorned this time – for it had not yet been embossed. Better still. Metal stamps bearing various heraldic crests were stacked on a high set of shelves. She picked one up and looked at it: which family was that?

She was thrown off her feet. Her heart began to race; her breathing stopped. One hand was gripping her hair painfully, another tightly grasping round her body, lifting her up and dragging her despite her struggles into the shadow of the alcove.

"I'll tell you who I am. And I'm not somebody to be treated in that insolent way."

The grating voice was behind her ear. She began to reach instinctively for her belt but he grabbed her wrist before she could find the knife-hilt.

"Oh no you don't," he said, and pinning her hands to her body with his arm he drew the long knife from its sheath and threw it away. It landed with a clatter on a pile of armour. Maeneb tried to twist free, kicking at his legs, but he was stronger. Much stronger. He pulled her around to face him and when she tried to wrench herself away he slapped her face, not especially hard. As he tugged at her shirt and she felt the stitching rip, she grew infuriated. She writhed in his grasp without success and he slapped her again, but harder: that one hurt.

"Don't you know what women are for?" he said, and he dragged her close against his face and kissed her. It was horrible, vile, a disgusting mouth on hers, an even more disgusting tongue; it was an insult, flooding her with fury and revulsion, and when her free hand found the little fruit knife in her left-hand pocket she pulled it out and stabbed him with it in the side of the neck.

"What?" the man said in surprise, and put his hand up to the knife. His grip loosened as he paused, touching the hilt embedded in his neck, his eyes startled. She had plunged it in deep.

Maeneb shook off his weakening grasp and freed herself. He did not try to stop her. His fingers were still on the handle of the fruit knife. He seemed to be wondering what to do.

"You stabbed me," he said, more bewildered than angry.

"Of course I did." She snatched up her long knife from the heap of metal and ran out down the side of the shop. When she glanced back he must have pulled the fruit knife out: for blood was leaping in long pulses from his neck, splattering the breastplates that hung around him, and his shaking hand did nothing to hold it back. His sleeve was already drenched in his own blood and then he was lunging with his arms, reaching helplessly for something before he started to slump forward.

Stars in heaven, I've killed him, Maeneb thought as she stood amidst the miniature suns and moons at the front of the shop. The world seemed shrunk to this small space around her, a tiny universe. I shouldn't have gone for the artery. But it was instinct. I've killed a Kelvhan nobleman. What do I do now?

Walk. Just walk away. There was still no shopkeeper in sight, although there were several people browsing other stalls a little further off. She patted a breastplate as if deciding not to buy it after all and strolled on down the cobbled path. Everyone seemed to be occupied with other wares and did not notice her particularly.

So she kept walking steadily down the row of stalls and across the junction to the next row. She was perhaps forty yards away before she heard the first clamour: a shout, some running feet, more shouts – for help, guards, help...

Maeneb kept on walking, just an ordinary Vonn who was exploring and didn't know her way around. She scratched her head and in the movement surreptitiously checked her hand and arm for blood. There was none on her that she could see. He shouldn't have pulled that knife out. He shouldn't have tried to rip her shirt off. His own fault.

But my fault, my fault. I could have just screamed and shouted and somebody would have come to help me. Wouldn't they, surely? Or they would have come to do nothing. Come to watch. He was a lord, he could do what he liked. Who was he? Did I kill him? Is he dead? If I didn't kill him, then he can point his finger at me...

She found that she had walked to the edge of the stalls and now she paused, shaken and disorientated. Where could she go? Her lodgings were behind her, through the market. She could not retrace that route, not now. The castle wall loomed close upon her right hand side.

And suddenly behind her surged the rumour, swelling, growing in force, a tide of outraged exclamations. It had moved as fast as she had.

"Dead?" said a woman five feet away, her voice high and shocked. "Stabbed? What, in our market?"

Maeneb pretended not to hear; or not to understand the Kelvhan words. As a group of four men consulted for a few seconds and then began to march along the street behind her, their minds purposeful and angry, she turned to walk away from them towards the wall. She tried to concentrate on keeping her pace even, her movements smooth and languid. But she could feel herself almost jerking with alarm. Where was she heading for? There was nowhere to go in this direction except right up to the castle gate.

So that was where she went. When she walked up to it, the two guards, as usual, stood beside it with long halberds pointing to the sky. Somebody was running up to speak urgently to the guard on the left side of the gate even as Maeneb addressed the man on the right.

"I have business with the Lady Gaelera," she said clearly.

At once he stepped aside and opened the little side door for her. Maeneb passed through the short dark tunnel and stood inside the castle, in the sudden silent chill of shadow by the high stone wall. The urgent clamour of the market crowd was shut out entirely.

What now? She could try to find Huldarion and explain to him, seek his protection. But no, she couldn't, that would be disastrous. What, one of his Riders murdering a noble? His Kelvhan host? No matter why – it was unthinkable. The consequences.

As she stood there wondering what to do – perhaps Parthenal could advise her – the guard who was still waiting by the entrance said,

"My lady of the Vonn? Where did you wish to go?"

There was only one answer she could give. "I have an interview with the Lady Gaelera," she said, "but I have forgotten the way to her rooms."

"Through the inner archway, turn left and follow the long cloister to the west tower..."



“Ah, yes, I remember now. Thank you.”

She walked sedately. She was too distinctive. Too identifiable. Who had seen her, back at the plate-armour stall? Had anyone? What would they do – would they follow her in here? The chain-mail seller. He’d heard the nobleman taunt her. What would he say? She must have been seen. Everyone was seen in Kelvha. There was no privacy. Now she was aware of guards at various corners of the castle: servants in the cloister, and some half-glimpsed figure that slipped out of her line of vision. No-one went unnoticed.

She had to go to Gaelera’s quarters. It would be noted and wondered at, but so would anything else she did. And at least nobody would be likely to barge in there.

By the time she reached the west tower her mind was a tumult of fears and unanswered questions. She hated confusion in other people’s minds and now she found she hated it even more within her own. It was weakening, disabling.

The one thing she had not thought of was what to do or say after she had climbed the stone staircase and knocked upon Gaelera’s door. The cowed maid opened it and let her in without a single question. She led Maeneb to the door of the parlour and announced her in a whisper before retreating.

Gaelera sat there in the window-seat, her embroidery on her lap as if she had not moved since the last time Maeneb visited. Only her dress was different. She did not rise but looked up in mute enquiry.

“I think I have just killed a man,” said Maeneb. Her voice would not work properly.

Gaelera gazed at her for a long moment before putting down her needlework with deliberate care. Then she stood up. Some expression crossed her face but Maeneb could not read it.

“Tell me,” she said.

Belatedly, Maeneb turned her head to check for the presence of the maid.

“She knows not to stay,” said Gaelera. “And if she stayed, she would know not to hear. What man?”

“I don’t know. A noble. I think. I am sure he was a noble.”

“Come here,” said Gaelera. She beckoned Maeneb, almost solicitous, and made her sit down next to the heap of embroidery on the cushions. Maeneb looked over her shoulder through the latticed window at the empty courtyard far below. Suddenly two pairs of soldiers crossed it, marching swiftly.

She swallowed. “I was in the eastern market, shopping for armour.” She did not say why nor did Gaelera ask. Instead Gaelera sat on the other side of the pile of fabric and listened intently, perfectly still with her head a little tilted, while Maeneb described what had happened.

“You think he died,” said Gaelera finally.

“Before I left the market I heard cries that he was dead.”

“Cries mean nothing. People love to exaggerate.”

“I aimed for the artery,” said Maeneb. “There was no point otherwise.”

Gaelera nodded slowly. Her face bore the glimmer of a smile. “Describe the man. His clothing.”

So Maeneb tried, recalling his thin neat beard, the dyed and carefully curled red-gold hair, the braid and tassels. His height – tall, strong, athletic. His probable age: the early twenties.

“Ah,” said Gaelera. She stood up, went in a stately rustling manner to the door and rang a small bell on a ledge next to it. When the maid appeared she said,

“I have an errand for you. I wish for dark-blue double-twisted thread, ten yards. Buy it from the larger silk-seller in the western market. You know the one?”

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wear my insignia. Ask for any news. I would like to hear what is happening out in the world."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Go now." Once the maid had departed, Gaelera said, "She is really quite an intelligent girl. And a discreet one. If we discover that you have truly killed a man, what will you do next?"

"I have no idea," said Maeneb miserably. "I suppose I had better leave, disappear, before I bring disgrace upon the Vonn."

Gaelera raised an eyebrow. "Well, that could be a last resort. Come. We will eat."

Motioning to Maeneb to stand up she led her out of the parlour and further down the tapestry-lined passage to another chamber. This was a warm room, almost too warm; for it contained a large, glowing fireplace with a griddle and an oven at one end. There was a long cupboard bearing on its top a stoneware basin and canisters and jars and open bowls of fruit and eggs.

This must be Gaelera's private kitchen, she assumed, although it was very plain compared to the ornateness of the parlour. There were no views overlooking the courtyard, no cushioned window-seat, only high stools by a dark wood table. The single window looked onto a wall.

"We will make fried cakes," Gaelera said. Unhooking a white pinafore apron from the door, she put it on over her immaculate gown, and tied it behind her back. It looked so incongruous that Maeneb did not know what to think.

Gaelera took up a bowl and broke an egg into it. "What do you eat in your lodgings?"

"I mostly buy food ready-made from the stalls," said Maeneb. "The others cook. I don't know what." She never joined them at the table in the dank, low-ceilinged kitchen of her lodgings, but ate nearly always by herself.

"You will like my fried cakes," said Gaelera. It was spoken like a command. She carefully beat flour into the egg, a little at a time, and added a dash of what was probably cream and a pinch of spices. Neither woman spoke until Gaelera added, in a conversational tone,

"Sometimes I have thought I would have liked to be a mother."

"I am sure that one day you will have that pleasure."

"No. I don't require the husband, nor do I really want the children. They are tiresome. But I should like to be head of my own household."

Maeneb looked around the kitchen. "It seems you have a household here."

"A toy one. A single woman cannot head a household unless she is a widow." Gaelera placed a knob of butter on the griddle and watched it sizzle into smoking nothingness. She spooned a dollop of her thick mixture onto it and said, "I am surprised at Meya, for that reason. She has a very comfortable life here and yet she has chosen to give it up for an unknown man and a wandering existence."

"I am sure Huldarion is—"

"Oh, yes, I am sure he will be an excellent husband, as husbands go. But I had not thought of her as an adventurer. And I am surprised Huldarion chose her. I had thought that he would pick Janeya." She placed a second spoonful of the thick batter on the griddle and took a step back to survey it as it began to spread. There was a crackling and a smell of frying which in other circumstances would have been quite pleasant. "But Janeya is dead. I saw her body."

Maeneb stood like a statue. "It was very tragic," she managed to say.

"Life in the castle often is. I really don't know why. Life should be simple. The body could have been anyone's, you know. No face."

"I... thought it wore Janeya's dress?"

"Where did you hear that?" asked Gaelera, still studying the griddle. "No matter. Please bring me a plate from inside the tall cupboard."

Maeneb found the plates. After a few more minutes of sizzling the cakes were served. Gaelera bid her sit down at the table to eat. She was right; her fried cake was very good, or would have been if Maeneb had been hungry. But her throat seemed to have closed up. Nevertheless she took as long as possible in eating because she could not think of anything to say.

Gaelera also took her time, eating fastidiously, cutting her cake into minute pieces.

"I hear the fires are all out now," she said after a while.

"I think so." Maeneb felt more able to talk about this subject. "There is just the smell of smoke everywhere, and a layer of ash. Some of the Riders have volunteered to go back there and help clear up. But I have not been in the northern quarter since that evening."

"It seems a darkburn was being kept secretly beneath the walls."

"So I heard also," said Maeneb, since whether it had been concealed before or not, the darkburn's presence was certainly no secret now. Everyone knew; and everyone had a theory. "The people called it a fire-demon," she added.

Gaelera looked up and stared into space for a few seconds. "I wonder why my father kept it there."

"I suppose he thought it would be safe," said Maeneb.

"Ah." She ate another tiny piece of pancake. "But it wasn't. It was freed. I wonder by whom."

"So do I," said Maeneb with feeling. She had the odd idea that Yaret had something to do with it: certainly Yaret's mind had been all over the place lately, and although she had told Maeneb that she hadn't been anywhere that night, Maeneb did not think she had been in the lodgings. When Maeneb woke she had been present, certainly, but not asleep. And the boots stowed underneath her bunk had been damply muddy.

"It is said that the guards failed in their duty."

"I don't know about that," said Maeneb.

"Of course they had to obey my father. If he had told them to set free the darkburn they would have been required to do so."

"Unless they found it already gone," said Maeneb. Then she stared down at her plate, appalled at what she had just said. How to recover? "I... I am quite sure your father would never have instructed them to do any such thing. He would not have dreamed of freeing the darkburn." She cursed herself. Her mind was as distracted as Yaret's, or worse; for otherwise she would never have thoughtlessly agreed with the assumption that Nerogun had plotted to release the darkburn.

But why had Gaelera said that? How had she known? Leor had told Maeneb that the city had been deliberately set on fire. Maybe he had told others too... or could Gaelera's father have hinted to her what had really happened?

Gaelera's mind, however, was still a curtained blank. Nor did her voice give any clue to her true thoughts as she went on, musingly.

"It merely seemed the sort of thing that my lord Post-Regent might well do. He enjoys inflicting suffering, of course," she said, matter-of-factly. "Especially if he could turn it to account. Maybe it had something to do with Janeya's death. So sudden and unfortunate."

Once again, at Janeya's name, Maeneb froze. But Gaelera did not seem to notice. She stood up, went over to the fire and poured two more spoonfuls of the cake mixture onto the griddle. Although Maeneb wanted to decline hers, she found herself unable.

Neither of them spoke, but listened to the hiss and whisper of the frying until Gaelera said, "But if the darkburn did not set the fires." She paused and seemed to wait.

Maeneb felt an overwhelming urge to fill the gap. Even if Gaelera already knew.

"There is a person called Adon," she said, and then she also stopped. Perhaps she had said too much. No, certainly she had said too much.

But Gaelera did not appear to take note of her words. Carefully she lifted the hot cakes from the griddle. The silent eating of them, and the clearing of the table, filled the space with slow domestic ritual which felt strangely weighted with significance. Then Gaelera took off her spotless pinafore and hung it up before suggesting they return to the parlour. As they sat down in the window-seat the maid returned.

"Ma'am, here is your thread. The news in the market is all of a murder just this morning, ma'am."

"Indeed? Who died? What happened?" Gaelera put her head on one side alertly. Maeneb stared at the floor.

"Ma'am, it seems it is not clear what happened, but Lord Daravun was found at an armoury shop with a knife in his neck."

"Lord Daravun! And who did it?"

"Ma'am, that is not known. Lord Daravun died soon after he was discovered. He was unable to speak."

"How unfortunate," said Gaelera calmly, reaching for her embroidery. "Were there no witnesses?"

"It seems not, ma'am."

"And the weapon?"

"A small knife, ma'am. They say it bears the forge mark of Martun: the smithy under the north wall."

"Ah." Gaelera nodded. "I expect it is a local man, then."

"The guards are investigating, ma'am."

"Good. Let us hope they find the culprit without delay. A footpad, I have no doubt. You may go now." Once the maid had left she said, "Lord Daravun. Well, well."

"Is he important?" asked Maeneb, and immediately despised the query, because every man was important to himself, and his rank should make no difference. But at the same time she knew that it would hardly matter here if she had killed a beggar.

"He was moderately important," said Gaelera, meditatively. "In himself, not at all. In his rank and family, more so. His uncle is my father's cousin."

"Really? I am very sorry," said Maeneb, realising with some shame that she was now expressing true regret for the first time. Until now she had thought only of the effect upon herself.

"I am not particularly sorry," Gaelera said. "Nor will my father be. Daravun was a self-regarding man, though generally harmless."

"I did not find him so."

"Evidently. How did you come to have a knife made by Martun's smithy? Have you visited it?"

"I have never been inside it," Maeneb said. "The knife was given me. It was a fruit knife."

"Given you by whom?"

"By another Rider." She was reluctant to name Rothir, but Gaelera let it pass.

"It is of interest," she said, "because Martun is himself high-born. You might not realise it to look at him, for the man is deformed, but he is of the family of Shargun and a minor lord in his own right."

"Then why is he a blacksmith?"

"Because of his deformity, of course. It has been also rumoured that he may have an acquaintance with the temple of Borgun." Gaelera laid down her sewing and stared into space.

"So what do I do now?" said Maeneb miserably.

"You do nothing. You go home and wait. Behave as you would normally."

"I'll try. But what if I'm identified? There was a shopkeeper who saw Lord Daravun approach me..."

"Where?"

"At a chain-mail stall."

"I will sound my father out about the matter," said Gaelera calmly. "The chain-mail man may well decide to keep his mouth shut rather than risk the difficulties of involvement. In any case I can enquire without mentioning the Vonn. My father has ultimate say over what his guards discover. I wish to sound him out about some other matters also. It is a good thing that you came to me." She held out her hand, and Maeneb realised that she was being dismissed.

"I thank you," she said, standing up.

"For what?" asked Gaelera coolly.

"For the fried cakes, and, er..."

"For more than that, I hope."

But Maeneb had recollected herself. "For your sympathy and help, my lady," she said, with a bow.

"I have no sympathy. It is an emotion unknown to me. But you may have my help hereafter if I think it useful." Gaelera rose from her seat, her skirt stiff and rustling around her, and escorted Maeneb to the door. "Daravun," she said reflectively. "And Shargun. And my father. Well. There are so many interesting possibilities."

## Chapter 39

"How do you find that which is hidden?" asked Yaret.

"I wish I knew," said Leor. The two of them had just sat down upon a tumbled wall amidst the charred remains of Old Tanneries Street. They were taking a brief rest from the depressing job of clearing up the broken and bedraggled houses of the northern quarter.

Leor was finding it depressing, at least; even though the fires' effects were not quite as ruinous as they could have been. Many buildings still stood, albeit without roofs and full of ash. But he was surprised that Yaret could go about the task with such apparent equanimity. She set to work as if this shattered landscape were entirely normal.

Thirty yards away, Durba and Naileb were helping a shopkeeper retrieve his wares from his ruined shop. Pewter mugs and plates, thought Leor, although they were recognisable only by their shape; for they were sooty black with not a gleam of metal.

"There is no spell for it?" persisted Yaret.

He tried to apply his mind to the query. "Well, it depends what sort of hidden thing you mean. Do you mean treasure? Because it depends on what it is and how deeply it is buried. I can find water hidden underneath the earth—"

"Well, anyone can do that," she said, "with a couple of twigs."

He swivelled round to stare at her. "What do you mean, *anyone*?"

"Anyone in Obandiro can. The children play at it."

"In Obandiro," said Leor, feeling slightly aggrieved, "the streets are also full of invisible hobs and lins by your account."

"They used to be," said Yaret. There was a tremor in her voice. And when Leor looked round at her, sitting beside him, there was a tremor in her face as well. She turned her head aside, ostensibly to brush ash off her sleeve; without success, for it merely added to the host of sooty smudges dappling her clothes.

Leor immediately felt ashamed for assuming she felt nothing. How could these ruins fail to affect her, when Obandiro had burned into far greater desolation than this place? Any pewter mugs in that inferno had been melted into shapeless lumps.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Yes. Thank you. I shouldn't have started thinking about Obandiro." She stared straight ahead, and took a deep breath. "To go back to my question. How do you find that which is deliberately hidden? Or, rather, deliberately hiding?"

"A person?"

"Possibly."

"Again, I wish I knew. Adon is still lurking somewhere in this city, I am sure of it. I wish that I could find him. Reveal him somehow." He stared at the thin straggle of people who were wandering past, picking miserably through the blackened spars of roofless homes. One old woman was laden with a pannier, far too big for her: she bent awkwardly under it, scrabbling in the detritus before tossing a chipped and broken cup into her pack.

"Would Adon be disguised, or hiding?" asked Yaret.

"How can I know?" He did not want to think about Adon, any more than Yaret wanted to think about Obandiro; but he recognised that she required distraction. And, although he did not wish to think about Adon, he needed to.

"I thought he was your other half," she said. "What would you do to hide yourself, if you were in his place?"

"I cannot put myself in Adon's place. We have grown too far apart."

But Adon would not disguise himself as an old woman, thought Leor, nor as that frail, stooped man poking at the ashes with his stick, nor that thin beggar-boy limping over to the temple. He would not lower himself so far. Too much self-regard: no beggars for him. It probably pained Adon even to disguise himself as me.

"Very well," said Yaret patiently. "But how can *you* hide yourself? Can you shape-shift?"

"Not as such. I can influence people's perception of me."

"Yes, I've seen you do that. Or failed to see you, rather. You make yourself so inconspicuous that you're not worth looking at. But you cannot make yourself invisible?"

He shook his head. "I can make myself dissolve into the background. I cannot cause myself, or anyone else, to vanish altogether. That would take mighty magic indeed."

"So if Adon were here, he would be physically hiding, or disguised; not standing before us in the rubble, listening unseen?"

"I would know if he were here," said Leor with certainty, although as he spoke he wondered if it were entirely justified. "Even when he disguises himself, there is something slightly wrong. A shimmer, an unreality. But you would have to look very carefully to see it."

"And you couldn't do a spell to reveal him?"

He shrugged, and Yaret sighed.

"All right. Let's get back to work," she said, sliding off the wall and picking up her spade.

"You're looking tired," said Leor with compassion. "And your leg is obviously hurting. You should go home."

She shook her head. "They need help here."

"I'm sure that when Huldarion asked for volunteers, he did not mean for all his Riders to turn out."

However, Leor knew that most of the Vonn lodging in the city had come to help in clearing-up. A few doors down, a chain of Riders under Landel's direction was emptying out a precariously damaged tenement, stacking up any furnishings that had escaped the worst of the flames. Beyond them, he could see Rothir, Parthenal and Theol working with four local men: some were moving fallen rafters while the rest dug out the sodden ashes underneath. They were looking for corpses.

Elsewhere, bands of Kelvhan soldiers did a little digging too; the search for the market murderer which had previously occupied them seemed to have been called off after only a few hours. Presumably they had caught the man. So now the soldiers' role was to move any bodies, and to deter looters. Leor could not imagine what anyone might find here worth looting.

Yaret had already got back to work on the building behind them, shifting planks of charcoaled wood, so he joined her. As she kicked aside a heap of blackened shards, Leor saw with a lurch of fear a body – though not a human, but a dog, as he realised almost instantly. A few moments later, however, they found its human owner, trapped beneath a rafter, the features unrecognisable.

Leor turned aside, sickened with himself as much as anything. He deplored his failure to defend these fragile mortals against Adon's malignance. Why had he not been able to save them all? His attempt to raise the river, of which he'd been so proud, had been too late, too poorly targeted. It hadn't been enough.

He called the nearest troop of Kelvhan soldiers over; then he and Yaret stood back while the corpse was moved.

"A guardian," she said softly.

"What?"

"Nothing." She murmured words which Leor recognised.

"Your Oveyn," he said.

"Yes."

"Yaret, you really should not be here."

"I really should." She began to dig again in a new spot. "I met the castle archivist this morning. We breakfasted together in a gloomy eatery beneath the city walls."

"The archivist? Who's that?"

"Oh, not a noble. The deputy for the Master of the Scrolls: a kind little man called Tamu, from somewhere in Outer Kelvha. He's quite young for someone with so much accumulated knowledge. He acts older than he is, and stupider."

"And what did you talk to him about?" asked Leor.

"Old lore. He mentioned a site quite far from here, by the sea, called the Place of Terns. Do you know where it is?"

"The Place of Terns," said Leor. "Oh, yes. I know it. Or I used to, many years ago." He straightened up and leant on his spade, looking out across the sea of rubble, across two centuries, hearing the slow thunder of the waves and the birds' imploring cries. A desolate coastline. Although it had not been uninhabited, its loneliness haunted his memory.

"What sort of place is it?" asked Yaret.

"What it's like now, I could not say. It was nothing much back then. There was a small tribe living on the coast. They were just starting to build a temple – but nothing like this one." He gestured at the Temple of Borgun behind them. "Much bigger, more extensive. That tribe has moved on since those days. And they've changed."

"They are the people that you once told me were the stonemen?"

He nodded. "Early stonemen. Quite different then to what they have become." It seemed a kind of slander to attach the label of stonemen to those industrious, ordinary, pacific people, so unlike their murderous descendants – the killers who now wore stones drilled right into their skulls rather than merely set upon their brows.

He watched a squad of Kelvhan soldiers march through the ruins and start to haul the body out with little ceremony, shedding ash and rubble in an untidy shower. "What did Tamu tell you about the Place of Terns?" he asked.

"Well," said Yaret, "apparently, according to some old document he found, the tribe collected spirits. They enclosed a field full of them. Spirits of wood and stone and iron that seemed to be alive and moving one moment, and as still as wood and stone and iron ought to be the next."

"Really," said Leor. He remembered the reticent, self-sufficient people building their temple to the stones, close to the sea. A large array of walls and walkways. He hadn't understood their explanations of the place. That they worshipped stones was easy to comprehend: but he had assumed they meant the four tall upright stones which they positioned in the centre of the building, where the priests had stood and droned their incantations. When he heard the people speak of the spirits of the earth, Leor thought that it was just more words for stones.

And spirits of wood... He had taken that to mean their sacred trees, brought with them on their long migration from the north, only to die in the harsh salt winds of the southern coastlands. Leor had found replacements on his travels: he dug up a few saplings, and, impressed by his own generous efforts, carried them back in a cart to present to the grateful tribe.

"What is it?" asked Yaret. He realised that he had not moved.

"I was thinking about the skeln," he said. "Those trees up north. The ones I brought back to the people of the coast."



“What about them?”

“They seemed to worship those trees, centuries ago. But there is one thing about the matter I don’t follow. It is such an unlikely coincidence. How did they ever discover that the resin from the skeln trees would control the darkburns? Because there were no darkburns back then.”

Yaret looked at him long and hard. “Think about it,” she said, as if she already knew the answer.

Leor tried to think. He visualised the skeln: those twisting, tough, contorted trees. Not tough enough, however. The replacement saplings that he had transported south had died eventually. And so, now, had the last remnants of the ancient skeln groves in the snowy north. He suspected that there were no skeln trees left in all the world... A saddening reflection.

Everything dies except for me, he thought, in a mixture of regret and relief. He watched the corpse being hauled out of the ruins by the soldiers. It was stiff and black. The soldiers lugged it carelessly to the entrance to the temple of Borgun, dropped it and knocked loudly on the door. Then they walked away before the knock was answered.

“They can’t just leave it there,” said Yaret, sounding distressed. She dropped her shovel and hobbled over to the temple. Her limp was quite pronounced; Leor found that it worried him.

Striding after Yaret, he soon overtook her, saying, “Don’t worry. I’ll see to it.” Since the temple door remained closed he pushed at it and when it swung open he carefully picked up the corpse to carry it inside. The burnt body was unyielding yet also felt fragile in his arms. Too light.

He entered slowly, accustoming his sight to the gloom within the temple. Yaret did not follow him. The echoing space was almost deserted but for one pair of quietly sobbing worshippers.

And the priest was in there, walking along the row of blackened bodies which had been laid down before three statues that stood together at the front. The Kelvhan army seemed to have picked this building as a convenient charnel-house: he supposed it got the corpses out of the way, although he had no idea what would happen to them next. Presumably once identified they would be buried outside the city.

He laid the corpse down gently with the others and stood up to watch the priest. As he moved along the line of bodies, the young priest touched each one with more careful attention than the soldiers had shown. He was murmuring words that Leor could not hear: another species of Oveyn, presumably. There was a strong smell of incense, perhaps to counteract any odour of decay.

Although he did not appear to have registered Leor’s presence, the priest now straightened up, walked over to him and bowed.

“You are the wizard Leor,” he said.

“I am.” He replied cautiously, not sure whether a wizard would be welcome in a temple dedicated to an entirely unrelated supernatural being. Not that he himself was supernatural in his own eyes; he simply had a nature different to that of other men.

But the priest merely nodded, saying, “I am called Hokiro. You are, I believe, an ally of the Vonn, and of their chief, Huldarion.”

“Yes.”

“Their hunting-man Veron pointed you out to me. He has told me something of you.”

“Veron knows a little about me,” said Leor warily, “but not much.”

The priest swept his hand around the temple. "Behold the compassion of Borgun. We took in first the wounded and disabled: and then the lost and homeless; and now the burnt, whose bodies are beyond repairing. Kelvha does nothing for them. It throws its suffering people crusts of bread and leaves the care of them to us."

"Indeed," said Leor, a little stiffly, for he was not in the mood for proselytizing.

"We do the work that they will not. And yet they castigate us for it," said Hokirot with gloomy passion. "All we ask for is acceptance by the city and its rulers. How can we win such acceptance?"

"That I cannot tell you."

Hokirot sighed. "Long have I hoped for some sign; some token that our work is not in vain. Long have I waited for the face of Borgun to be shown before me: to see him reborn, re-awakened, and to see him in turn re-awake his people."

"I am afraid you are to be disappointed – as far as the Vonn go, at least. Huldariot is not Borgun."

"No. Yet I had hoped. And hope is not all gone, for here *you* are."

"Me?" Leor was suddenly alarmed. "What have I to do with the matter?"

"You are a wizard. You can perhaps divine the presence of Borgun, for somewhere in this city he is hidden, I am sure of it–"

"Wait," said Leor. "Wait. Hidden? What do you mean?"

"I have had signs."

"Then they are false," Leor said instinctively, before he thought again, and asked, "What signs?"

"Our statues weep," Hokirot said. He pointed at the three candlelit statues that stood over the corpses. One portrayed a man holding a child, another a man stooped with age, and between them an upright figure with only one arm and a mutilated face. Was that a tear beneath the statue's single eye?

"Statues weep all the time," explained Leor. "It's condensation on the stone. I expect it's been made worse by the water sprayed around during the fires."

"Our statues are of wood," Hokirot murmured.

Leor gazed at the silent figures, wondering what to say.

"Even if I could divine some hidden presence," he said at last, "it should not be relied on to be well-inclined, or to be the true Borgun. There is another wizard in this city–"

"Yes, I have learnt that. A deceiver. He disguised himself as the Lord Huldariot."

"Then you know to beware of anyone claiming to be Borgun. It is likely to be the same deceiver."

"I do not look for anyone claiming to be Borgun," the priest said quietly.

Leor was flummoxed. "Then what *are* you looking for?"

"I am looking for someone who does not claim to be Borgun."

"Well, that's the whole city, then," said Leor. He pitied the man, who clearly was obsessed. Why the fixation on finding hidden things? First Yaret, and now this priest... Why did they turn to *him*?

Because I am a wizard, he thought, and wizards can do anything, in people's minds at least. If they only knew how limited my powers really are, they would not ask such favours. Although I raised a sea. I did that much. And with that memory his spirit surged a little.

Adon does so much evil with his wizardry, he thought, he causes so much harm and pain and desolation. That is why I have forsworn my own powers of magic.

Yet why were those powers given to me, if not for me to use? I feel them heave within me like a many-stranded voice that clamours to be heard, a surging, pushing tide as if of something waiting to be born. I am merely the instrument. My magic is like music: it is entirely separate from me, yet can only live through me. Only I can bring it forth.

The priest was still looking at him, waiting and expectant. "If you could use your wizardry to reveal Borgun, if only for an instant..."

"I'm sorry," Leor said. "I cannot help you. I'd better go now: there is much to do." His voice seemed to echo as if in a tomb.

I have entombed my powers, he thought. I have buried them alive.

The priest bowed his head, somewhat sadly, and stepped aside to let him leave the temple.

## **Chapter 40**

Another corpse was being carried in through the bright slice of light that was the door; this time by the Riders Theol and Dorac.

As they entered with their burden, Leor went out. The brilliance of daylight made him blink after the soft candlelit dusk. Without the incense, the pervasive stink of smoke and of rank river-water seemed much stronger than before. Appearances are relative, he thought. Things that were hidden become apparent in the right circumstances. The dark becomes light.

Durba and Yaret were talking nearby – at least, Yaret was talking while Durba made signs. Leor tried to interpret them, and failed. Then both the women took up their spades and began to walk towards an untouched pile of rubble. Yaret's foot was dragging.

Leor mused idly about how he might reveal that which was hidden. He realised that he had seldom used his wizardry to find anything lost, other than an occasional key or pen: and that had simply been a matter of summoning the metal or the quill that they were made of. Not difficult. An inconsequential trifle. Hardly wizardry at all.

What about things deliberately concealed? In the past he'd tracked some stolen coins, and once a pig. That had been a favour for a farmer who had housed him. Leor had been able to spin a charm out of the halter that had held it.

But things that were hidden by their very nature, or deliberately concealed by themselves: that was something else again. Borgun, if he existed, would be wise to hide himself, thought Leor, in a city such as Kelvha. One arm and half a face. He wouldn't last long here.

He watched Yaret climb clumsily over the pile of rubble and rafters to join Durba, who was pointing down at something. Probably another corpse. When, seconds later, Yaret called out to the Riders, he caught a note in her voice that had not been there before. It dismayed him. He began to hurry towards them; Rothir and Parthenal too were walking over to check what they had found.

It was a child. Or it had been a child, before the rafters had collapsed across it and the fire transformed it from a running, laughing infant to this part-blackened wreck. Its hand still held a ball: it moved him more than all the other corpses put together. A mistake to think of the dead child as it had once been. But, no, Leor reproved himself. It was a greater mistake not to.

Yaret straightened up and walked away. Rothir gazed after her as if undecided whether to go and give her comfort. Instead he bent to the task of disentangling the burnt lengths of wood from the child's body so that it could be freed, while Durba looked on with a wretched face. Rothir's face could not be read, being almost as sooty as the corpses. But his hands were gentle. Parthenal carried away the crumbling rafters.

Leor offered his help, although it was not needed. He was superfluous. Yet how many other bodies, he wondered, were still hidden in these smoking ruins? Would he not make it much easier for everyone if he could just reveal them by some spell?

He would not want to raise them as he had raised the darkburn from its pit – to lift them up with dead limbs flailing, heads flopping, shedding their load of ash. That would be horrific. But if he could somehow mark where the dead lay undiscovered, that might help.

How would they show themselves? He imagined a movement of the soot, blown in the breeze; perhaps a glimmer on the ash to indicate where life had been so recently. Life was a strange thing and left many traces.

As he waited for Rothir to remove another blackened beam, he tested possibilities, touching them with the power that lay inside him. Dormant, at the moment; but risingly swift to his summons. He was conscious of that twining flux of voices, that stream, that river, that sweeping flood, waiting to be undammed.

A spell to show the hidden, even briefly... Yes. Now he knew how. Of course. His own power seemed to tell him. It should not be so hard, after all. It was worth a try, at least.

So lift the veil, thought Leor, between your lives and our eyes. Show yourselves to us, you hidden ones. A few seconds will do.

He was aware of the power gathering in his mind, surging, spiralling like an inner whirlpool. As he both observed it and directed it, he felt again the growing exhilaration that he had felt at the making of his shallow sea. With a little more time and planning, he could have made it so much bigger. So much better. What could he not do with this force at his disposal? Why had he been determined to ignore it for so long? It was a part of him. It needed to be used.

Parthenal was asking him to lend a hand, but Leor barely heard him. He was vaguely conscious that Theol came over to carry the small corpse away; that the others bent their heads in formal sorrow: he bent his head too, but his mind was no longer on the child. He was intent on his inward self.

He closed his eyes, the better to see his wizardry. It was a pointing finger now, a hand, an arm, a shoulder, a body of will – a body far greater than his own, that stretched out to the surrounding street and in the great dam-burst of his power flooded it with magic as he had so lately flooded it with water.

The coursing of this tide of magic filled him with tingling heat. *Reveal those who are hidden*, he commanded: *let them be perceived*.

"Oh," said Durba. "Lin!"

In his surprise at hearing Durba's voice Leor's eyes flew open. He saw...

What were they?

Those are not corpses, he thought, risen or otherwise. They are... small people? No. Tree trunks rising from the pavement, no higher than my waist? Maybe. Strange unimagined animals, squat and surprised? Are they alive?

If alive, they were not visible for long. They were flickering, and in the next few seconds while all the others gawped, they faded and went out. Nothing remained of them. Where they had been there were no more than tumbled stones and some little piles of ash.

"*What?*" said Rothir. He was staring at Yaret as if she had just grown feathers. She, in her turn, was staring at the space where one of the momentary things had been.

"They were all over the place," cried Durba hoarsely, and then clapped her hand over her mouth in further shock. All along the street people had stopped digging to gaze around: he heard their cries and queries of bewilderment.

Yaret turned to Leor.

"Was that you? Uncovering the lin?" She sounded shaken.

"Those were lin? I was trying to uncover something else," he said, feeling equally shaken. The tingling had gone and left him weak. "I wasn't expecting *that*."

"There were dozens of them," exclaimed Parthenal, smiling in curious wonder, and still gazing around although the strange apparitions had now entirely disappeared.

"You saw them too?" said Yaret to Rothir.

"I saw... something." Rothir appeared dazed.

"You saw lin."

Rothir seemed to gather himself. "I... saw something for a moment. I have no idea if it was illusory or real."

"They were real," said Durba. Her voice was hoarse as if from long disuse.

"Are they alive?" demanded Parthenal.

"In their own way," said Yaret. She took a deep breath and began to recite an incantation in the Bandiran tongue.

That is a blessing or a prayer to lins, thought Leor. Is it by Madeo? Oh, Madeo, I wish that you had seen this. What would you make of it? Is this the opposite of your Oveyn for the dead?

The dead whom I failed to reveal after all... Ah, that was too presumptuous of me. The dead follow their own laws.

When Yaret had finished her recitation, Parthenal addressed her with a hint of mischief in his voice.

"You worship lins, Yaret – that's probably why they were gathered around you."

"What? I don't worship them," she said in some surprise. "I acknowledge them. What do you mean, they were gathered around me?"

"More round you than anyone," croaked Durba, and Leor realised she was right. The greatest concentration of the lin had been clustered around Yaret.

"They recognised you," said Parthenal, grinning.

"I doubt that. I've never thought that they can distinguish between people." Yaret looked perplexed.

"Well," said Leor, who was feeling a mixture of a certain pride and baffled disappointment, "I'm afraid that making them reveal themselves served no useful purpose after all. A curiosity, that's all." Why had his magic demanded to be used, if only to show lins? They were interesting enough, but hardly relevant.

"No useful purpose?" said Yaret, consideringly. "It was very useful. You may not think so, but I do. It confirms something that I have been suspecting. All these lins in one place? Durba, when we did our survey of the city, you saw no more than one per street on average, did you?"

"Hang on. What survey?" asked Rothir in a startled rumble.

"Durba has a gift for spotting lin. We did a tour of Kelvha City together, to see how many there are here."

"What on earth for?" asked Parthenal.

Yaret shrugged. "Something to do? Actually, I really wanted to know, although it's not easy to explain why."

"Have a go anyway," said Rothir. He spoke with careful interest despite his frown. Leor thought he was trying to temper his natural severity of matter.

"Well. I think that there is some connection between lins and darkburns." She hesitated until Rothir nodded encouragingly.

"Go on," he said.

"For a start," she said, "darkburns attract lins. When I was travelling alone from Obandiro, I found a darkburn trapped in a trench – and I saw several lins gathered close to it." She turned to Leor. "And the darkburn which you raised from the pit, Leor: there were lins there too, nearby. Durba saw them although we didn't."

Leor looked over at Durba, who had walked away to poke a foot at the nearest little pile of ash that had momentarily been a sort-of-person. It was nothing now. How could she have seen so many lins on the northern battlefield when he had noticed none?

Yaret went on. "Then once the Kelvhans brought the darkburn here and kept it under the north wall, there were far more lins and hobs in the northern quarter than anywhere else in the city."

"That might have always been the case," said Parthenal. "You don't know what it was like before."

"That's true."

Rothir wrinkled his brow. "But why are they here now? The darkburn has gone."

"Thanks to you, dwarf," said Parthenal drily.

Rothir frowned at him, all his severity returning. "I told you that in confidence."

"You mean I guessed it," Parthenal corrected him. "It wasn't difficult. All that sneaking around the city with Veron? Anyway, everyone here knows, and I'll keep your secret safe. Durba can't hear us."

Yaret glanced across to check that this was true before she spoke again, more diffidently.

"Well. The thing is, the darkburn hasn't altogether gone. Sorry, Rothir."

Leor didn't understand what she was talking about until she withdrew a small black lump of charcoal from her pocket.

"Is that a piece of darkburn?" he demanded.

"You kept a fragment," said Rothir. Once again he did not sound annoyed, but rather, almost resigned. "So do you think that piece of darkburn is attracting lins?"

"Just lins?" said Leor. "No hobs or woodwones?" He spoke facetiously, but Yaret answered with seriousness.

"I'm not sure there's much difference. It's us who give them labels. Hobs for houses, woodwones for the trees, lins by water. They're basically all the same creature, but with different shapes."

"Stumps and shrubs and stones... but what are they really?" asked Rothir.

"Not even the Farwth understood their nature." Yaret looked at Leor. "You don't either, do you?"

He felt almost shame as he shook his head. He'd never bothered thinking about lins because they impinged so little on him. They were undoubtedly magical in some fashion, as he was himself. Yet he had assumed that he could learn nothing useful about them. Did his ignorance decide their importance? Were they not of use to themselves, if no-one else?

Everyone is of use to themselves, he thought, and who am I to say they have no relevance? My magic seemed to think them worth revealing.

"All right," said Rothir, nodding to Yaret. "Let's say that lins are interested in darkburns. Why is that significant?"

"Don't laugh," said Yaret.

"I won't, I promise."

"I believe that lins and darkburns are related."

"Related!" protested Leor, instantly incredulous. "I can't imagine two things that are more far apart. The one is harmless and unseen – the other is all too tangible, and totally destructive."

But Yaret raised her chin and looked at him defiantly.

"I disagree, Leor. In my view they are very close. In fact, I think that lins and darkburns are one and the same thing."

## Chapter 41

"You shouldn't be afraid of Huldarion," said Parthenal as he led the way into the stables. "He doesn't bite. Not hard, anyway."

"I'm not afraid of him," said Yaret, although she felt that this was not altogether true. "But I am afraid of letting slip anything that he ought not to know."

"You won't do that. In any case," said Rothir, "you shouldn't worry about the killing of the darkburn. That's my problem, and Veron's; it's our responsibility."

"Even so," said Yaret.

It wasn't just the disappearing darkburn that gnawed at her conscience. It was the presence of Janeya within the Riders' lodgings – for none of the men knew anything about that: not Rothir, not Parthenal, none of them. She feared, not Huldarion himself, but his swiftly analysing intellect.

However, it was too late now. She had agreed that the leader of the Vonn needed to be told about her theory; and that prospect brought another fear, that he would not believe her. After all, why should he? What use were theories to anybody, in any case?

The stables that housed the horses of the Vonn were warm inside, the air thick with the scents of manure and hay. Motes drifted through a single sunbeam; all else was drowsing brown half-shadow. Rothir strode over to speak to the Kelvhan stable-boy, while Parthenal stepped across to his horse Alda, stroking her with a tender sympathy he seldom showed to any human other than the wounded. Then he moved up and down the stalls to check the other Riders' horses, monitoring their breathing, inspecting legs and eyes.

"Happy enough. But they'll be glad to be let out," he said. "Not long now."

Yaret went over to the stall where Poda stood, looking gracefully noble even in repose. Far too grand a horse for her, she was aware. Smoothing Poda's mane, she thought about her donkeys – now so far away, not just in terms of miles. Ambling around their quiet corner of the world; or a corner that she hoped stayed quiet. She missed them. Soon she would ride Poda out of the city and across wildlands she had never seen, to further battle, and she did not know whether to be glad or fearful.

But first, this. Huldarion and his three most senior men, as well as Veron, now entered the sleepy half-light of the stables. Thoronal wrinkled his nose fastidiously at the heady wholesome stink.

"There are no spy-holes here, I presume?" he asked.

"I doubt if they bother spying on the horses," answered Solon with a note of languid derision.

"Rigal and I have checked already," said Rothir, "and I've just sent the stable-boy out on a long errand."

Huldarion turned to Yaret. "You asked to see me. What is it about?" He was framed by a golden halo of soft light, in which the straw-dust drifted: yet despite this ethereal aura his manner seemed, if anything, more forbidding and austere than ever. Perhaps it was the effect of living permanently on his guard, surrounded by listening servants and spyholes.

"Yaret has a theory," said Rothir, and she felt a wave of gratitude for his solid presence.

"An eccentric one," added Parthenal, with an amused smile at her. That also helped.

"It's about lins and darkburns," she said, kicking down her nervousness. Then she had to explain all over again what lins were, for Thoronal's benefit. But no-one disputed their existence, after the visions of the previous day. Even Solon nodded.



"I saw four of them suddenly appear amongst the ash like mushrooms: and then – poof – they were gone again. And it was Leor who revealed them," he said thoughtfully. "Who knew he had such power at his command?"

"He wasn't trying to reveal the lins, apparently," said Rothir. "He said he was hoping to uncover where the dead lay, underneath the ash and rubble."

"But the spell uncovered a whole number of other hidden things, quite apart from lins," added Parthenal. "Durba found her voice. Landel found a hoard of antique coins; it's been handed over to the Kelvhan soldiers, though they didn't seem too interested."

"They wouldn't put much value on anything found in the northern quarter," observed Uld.

"Tiburé found her wedding ring," said Yaret, before belatedly realising that this might not be a tactful thing to say in front of Tiburé's husband – or ex-husband – Solon. She hurried on. "And Theol saw an inn-sign hanging where none had been before."

"He would," said Parthenal.

"The priest inside the temple of Borgun found a concealed chalice," remarked Veron.

But Huldarion waved away all these wonders with a flick of his scarred hand. "Go back to the lins. What in your opinion is their connection to the darkburns?"

"I believe they are, in essence, one and the same thing. They behave in similar ways." Slow down, Yaret told herself. Take up male mode, be strong-voiced: confident and self-assured. But it wasn't easy, in such company, for she felt like an impostor. She continued none the less. "Lins and darkburns are both repelled by the stonemen's stones. When we carry the stones they retreat from us."

Huldarion frowned more deeply. "Lins do that? Are you quite sure?"

"I've seen it ever since I first acquired a stone." That caused a painful twinge of memory: for the stone had been taken from the first stoneman she had killed – or stoneboy, rather, abandoned in Erbulet, that burnt out town far to the north. In his lonely agony, he had begged Yaret for death. Just as the darkburns did...

She went on with some difficulty. "While I had the stones in my pocket, no lin came within ten or twenty yards of me. Without them, though, it was a different matter. Which of us had kept our stones with us yesterday, during the appearance of the lins?"

"None of us, I should think," said Uld. "There was no need; no darkburns to protect against."

"And we all saw lin close by."

"That is no proof of anything," said Thoronal.

"Not on its own," she said. "But according to Leor, the stonemen's ancestors used to control spirits of earth or stone with the resin of the skeln tree. That's the same ingredient that they use now to control the darkburns."

"There is no certainty that by such spirits the lin are meant," said Huldarion. "Nor does it mean that the lin and darkburns are necessarily related."

She persevered. "Both are indistinct and hard to see. But when they become visible, their shapes are sometimes similar: woodwones are long and branched, for instance, not unlike some of the darkburns."

Huldarion frowned. "Yet others are totally dissimilar. Remember the darkburn that you and Eled first encountered in the forest: you told us that was lizardlike, as were the firedrakes that attacked our Riders in the south. Is that not so, Parthenal?"

"Lizardlike indeed," Parthenal replied. "Low, and crawling on four legs: nothing like the majority of darkburns. And then there was that strange darkburn that we came across while pursuing the stoneman army – it had once been winged, like a giant eagle, but with the head of a dog. It reminded me of a creature from a storybook. A storybook of nightmares."

"All the same, I believe they are related," Yaret persisted stubbornly, aware that her feeble argument was in danger of falling to pieces. "Lins gather where the darkburns are – so long as there aren't any stones or stonemen close by to repel them."

"Hmm," said Solon.

"So you are now an expert on the darkburns," said Thoronal with heavy disdain. "Yet you spun those lies about them in front of Nerogun and the Prince. Tunnelling through the earth! What sheer nonsense. I'm amazed that Faldron fell for it."

She in her turn was surprised at Thoronal's obtuseness. "Of course I spun a tale. What, would you have rather seen all those soldiers slaughtered for no reason?" she asked. "They had committed no crime."

"Their crime was to have let the darkburn escape," said Huldarion. "And escape it certainly did. Do you have any knowledge of what happened there?"

Yaret caught her breath. She felt Rothir, alongside her, become very still. Veron, on the other hand, looked exactly as he always did; keen and interested as if he would like to know the answer too.

"I assumed that Leor had something to do with it, although I have not asked him," she replied. That was perfectly true, after all.

"I note that Leor has avoided meeting us since then," said Uld reflectively.

"Indeed," said Huldarion, his gaze still boring into Yaret. "Although he sent a message to me earlier today. He tells us that the fires were started by Adon and Nerogun – presumably after they found the darkburn had mysteriously vanished. So if wizardry was used to dispose of the darkburn, it was not by Adon's will."

"Leor's, then? But Leor has repudiated his own wizardry," Uld pointed out.

"Only when it suits him," Solon said. "He raised that darkburn from its ditch in the first place, did he not?"

Huldarion nodded. "Leor may well have had a hand in it," he said. "But I would be extremely angry were it to be found that any of my Riders had been involved in the darkburn's disappearance, without my knowledge or consent."

As he looked round slowly at each of them in turn, Yaret was glad that his gaze did not rest on Rothir for more than a second. It rested somewhat longer on her.

Well, I am not a Rider, she thought defiantly, as she gazed back. I am your ally but not your subject.

All the same it seemed an endless minute before Huldarion finally spoke again.

"Well, well. Perhaps, after all, it was the guards' incompetence. Who knows? The darkburn is gone." None the less, Yaret felt sure that he had merely decided to set the matter aside for the time being.

"At least the Kelvhans can perform no experiments with it now," said Uld.

"Until they find themselves another," said Thoronal. "Yes? What is it?" For Rigal, standing sentry outside the stable, had poked his head around the door.

"There's someone from the castle," he said. "Wishing to see Lord Huldarion. Man by the name of – what was it again?"

"Tamu," said a small voice. The archivist stood behind Rigal in the doorway, blinking and looking horrified at the sight of so many tall and stern-faced Riders. Yaret gave him a reassuring smile, but nobody else did; and in the shadows deepened by that single dusty sunbeam, he did not seem to notice her.

"Tamu. What can I do for you?" said Huldarion. His forbidding expression did not change.

Tamu tiptoed in across the straw-littered floor, past the stalls of restless horses. They were not used to so much activity in their stables.

"Sir, I mean Sire, I mean my lord, um, all my lords," he said, twitchy with nervousness and bowing several times. "I did not know where to find you, I mean it took a while. I have come across a document that might be of interest, I mean, I can't be sure, obviously, but it seems to me..." His voice disappeared amidst the snorting and shuffling of the horses.

"For stars' sake, man, get on with it," exclaimed Thoronal. "We have important matters to discuss here."

"And Tamu may have important matters to divulge to us," said Parthenal. He smiled at the archivist, and that smile, Yaret perceived, did register with Tamu; although, if anything, it left him looking even more frightened than before. "Would you like privacy with Huldarion?" enquired Parthenal gently. "Shall we leave you?"

"It may be nothing," said Tamu helplessly.

"You spoke of a document. Do you have it with you now?" Huldarion asked.

Tamu pulled out a yellow folded parchment from his inner pocket. It was charred along one edge and smelt strongly of smoke.

"I – I found this in a burnt-out bookshop, in the northern quarter," he said. "In amongst a load of other papers. Most of them were just stock-taking and accounts. They are notes made by a merchant on his journeys four hundred years ago. He was a trader of spices and incense who travelled along the southern coast both to east and west; but it is the eastern leg that is of import here."

Tamu was gaining confidence as he spoke. Yaret thought, that is because he knows what he is talking about. Unlike me.

"And?" said Solon.

"He made several visits to the Place of Terns. It's mentioned on this sheet, just here."

Unfolding the parchment, Tamu held it up to the sunbeam and pointed to the spidery scrawl.

"What's that? It's illegible. It could say anything," complained Thoronal.

"It's an unusual and antique form of Kelvhan, which has taken me some time to decipher. The merchant noted down the customs of the people of the Place of Terns: partly out of interest, I think, but also because of the commercial possibilities of the place."

"Commerce? What sort of commerce?" queried Uld.

"The local people seem to have used a lot of incense in their worship," answered Tamu, "as well as pigments from the earth, and plants. The merchant was interested in all these. The inhabitants were avid worshippers of natural phenomena: he mentions stones, trees, and the sea."

"The sea," repeated Huldarion.

"Yes. They referred to themselves in their own tongue as the stonemen, because of their veneration of stones. The Place of Terns was a sacred site where these people built monuments and a temple complex." Tamu paused.

Thoronal said, with what Yaret thought was unnecessary dismissiveness, "We know about all this. Do you have nothing new to add?"

"Give him a chance," said Parthenal.

"Please go on," said Huldarion, still severe. Tamu took a deep breath before continuing.

"They also, also built a monastery," he said, more stammeringly, "and a, and a, what you might call a school to train their priests."

"Let me see this document." Huldarion took the parchment from Tamu, and walked over to stand beneath the window with it. A horse stamped and sighed. The rest of them waited while he scrutinised the pages.

Yaret in turn studied Huldarion, reflecting on how hard it must be to appear kindly with those scars; to always have to wear that fearsome mask that could not be removed. To have that constant air of unapproachability.

Yet when Huldarion lowered the parchment and turned again to Tamu his voice was much more gentle than his face.

"Did the site have dormitories?" he asked. "Did children live there?"

"Children? I'm not sure," said Tamu, looking puzzled, "at least, the merchant doesn't say. He was more concerned with anything he could trade. He wrote of a drug they used during their rituals: it seems to have heightened their consciousness, for they told the merchant that it made their minds open to all things. They called it Athil."

"Ah! An early form of Athelid," said Uld.

Thoronal opened his mouth – no doubt to object again – until Huldarion gave him a fleeting glance, at which he closed it.

"That is interesting," said Huldarion. "Where did they obtain this drug?"

"It seems they manufactured it themselves," the archivist replied. "The merchant enquired of what herb the drug was made. Unfortunately he did not fully understand their answer. They told him that the Athil was dug up from drains and ditches in the area." Yaret noted how under Huldarion's attentive gaze Tamu had grown more sure of himself again.

So dependent is he on the kindness of others, she thought, a little sadly. But then are not we all?

"Drains and ditches," repeated Solon. "A weed, then."

"But they dug it up," said Parthenal.

"So? Possibly a root."

"Or not a plant at all, but some mineral," suggested Yaret, although she did not know why that idea came into her mind.

Solon looked askance at her. "An edible mineral? That would be a first."

Yaret thought of salt; and of the clay that some doctors in Obandiro prescribed for stomach upsets. Used to prescribe. She closed her mouth.

"Tamu; do your merchant's notes tell you anything else about the stonemen's settlements, or the road that leads there?" asked Huldarion.

"Well, he talks of Red Roads, which it seems were not roads at all but many winding streams or maybe inlets. A stoneman he met showed him the way through. And – quite unexpectedly – I found a map the merchant made: I have it here." Tamu rustled in his pocket again. "It had been hidden amongst the accounts. I can leave it with you."

"Is it not a precious archive?" asked Parthenal with a little laughter in his voice.

"Oh, no," said Tamu seriously. "This is not part of the castle collection. It was rescued from the burnt-out shop I spoke of, on Old Tanneries Street." He handed the parchments over to Huldarion.

"I thank you," said Huldarion. "You said that there were other documents?"

"Mostly accounts. But I intend to go back tomorrow to the same shop and see if there is anything else to be found there."

"A good idea. We will reimburse you for anything relevant that you buy. Take one of my Riders."

"I'll go," said Solon, off-handedly.

"Or I can," offered Parthenal.

Huldarion surveyed each of them, before saying, "Thoronal: you go."

Thoronal looked sulky. Tamu was not happy either: Yaret saw his eyes flicker half-way towards Parthenal and away again.

Oh, little man, she thought with compassion, don't hanker after *him*. He's kind to you, but that might just be because Thoronal is not, and Parthenal likes to thwart his cousin. Don't yearn for Parthenal, whatever you do.

But after all she was probably mistaken. There was nothing in Tamu's behaviour to suggest any hankering of the sort. It was only the memory of the evening she had dined with Tamu that had put it in her head: for she had noticed how Tamu became more confused and clumsy as soon as Parthenal walked into the eating-house. Still, that might have been from sheer nervousness. She had mentioned it to nobody, because it would not be fair to do so.

And Tamu did not look at Parthenal again now. He said unenthusiastically to Thoronal, "Should we meet at the castle gate, an hour after dawn?" Thoronal replied with a grunt.

"We are grateful to you, Tamu," said Huldarion, as he rolled up the document. "Shall we see you at the music hall this evening?"

"Me?" He looked startled. "Oh no, no. I am not permitted to attend the musical event."

"A shame. It should be a rare treat," said Solon in his sarcastic way.

"Well, hardly that. But we ought to make the most of it," said Parthenal. "Not many more such delightful evenings are left to us now, thank goodness." At those words, she thought Tamu looked a little downcast.

"I am surprised that the event is still being held, in the light of the Lady Janeya's untimely death," Uld remarked.

"Indeed," replied Huldarion gravely. "It was extremely sad. I grieve for her. And also for those many victims of the fires: it seems indecent to continue with the music as if nothing much had happened."

"But this is Kelvha," murmured Tamu. Then, looking aghast at what he had just said, he made a sketchy bow and almost ran out of the stables.

After a few more words, Huldarion and his three senior counsellors also left. Yaret found herself breathing more easily. Her various secrets were, it seemed, still safe. She turned to Parthenal.

"A musical evening? Why will that not be a treat?" she asked. "Music is always a treat."

"But they have some very strange instruments in the castle," he replied. "*Screechy* is the best description."

"Would you care to go to it, Yaret?" asked Rothir. "Female Riders are invited."

"Take my place," put in Veron. "I certainly won't be going."

"In that case, yes, I would like to. Thank you." The invitation gave her pleasure: for she enjoyed music.

But no, be honest, she reproved herself. My pleasure is because it was Rothir who asked me.

Yet am I so dependent for my happiness on one man's attention? I am as bad as Tamu, she thought a little wearily; yearning after a Rider who would not even consider me that way. To Rothir I'm just an affable one-legged companion. So stay affable. Be content with that.

"And what will you be doing, Veron, while we're enjoying screechy music?" enquired Parthenal.

"Me? I'm off to talk to Martun. He might ride out with the army when we leave."

"Why?" said Rothir.

"Why not? An armourer is always useful."

"Veron, did you see anything when the lin appeared?" asked Parthenal. "Anything secret that leapt into sudden view?"

"See that all the time," said Veron, "and I thank the stars for it." He nodded to them and departed.

"He doesn't care about the lin," said Yaret.

"Well, I suppose they're not nearly as impressive as the huntress," Parthenal remarked. "Unobtrusive little things. Like Tamu. I wonder what hidden wonder Tamu saw at that moment, cocooned in his archives."

"The map," said Yaret. "But you saw the lin, did you not, Rothir?"

"I suppose so. If they were the little stubby beings, like tree-stumps." Rothir paused as if weighing his words, before he went on. "I saw something else as well. I saw a woman."

"A woman?" repeated Parthenal with a laugh.

"Standing just behind Yaret." Rothir turned to face her. "Or even wrapped around you, somehow, like a cloak. It was strange. I wasn't sure if I ought to tell you."

Yaret stared at him, shocked. "What sort of woman? Not the huntress?" she asked, in sudden trepidation.

"No, no. Not the huntress," he assured her. "Not as tall or terrifying. Not silver: more of gold... a warm, soft gold, like the light upon that pile of straw. She seemed almost to be another one of you – a reflection, or a glowing shadow."

"Oh," said Yaret. "Was it my mother?" She looked over at the ray of sunlight that fell upon the straw, and felt tears welling in her eyes.

Stupid, stupid. Stop it now, she commanded. He did not like her crying.

And in truth, why weep? She had hardly known her mother – who had died when she was three, whom she did not even remember except as an occasional quiet presence in her dreams. A presence with no face.

"I have no way of knowing who it was," said Rothir sombrely.

Yaret could tell that now he wished he hadn't mentioned it. So she blinked determinedly and said, "Well, I'll see you later. I'll come round for the screechy music." Walking quickly out of the stable-block she escaped across the yard.

*But oh, my mother,* she thought, once she was in the anonymity of the street. Hurrying pedestrians brushed past her: she dodged to avoid them, and wiped her face, because no-one now was looking.

*Oh, my mother,* she whispered to the breeze, and felt the words be swirled away into the sky.

My mother. Were you there, beside me? Are you there still, a shade of light embracing me, hidden until Leor's spell revealed you?

Or if not my mother, Madeo. My ancestor, the bard.

Or if not her, my grandmother, my Gramma Thuli. Or any of the dead I left behind, the lost people of Obandiro, who stand always at my shoulder.

For whom I do all this, and for no other reason. I must not forget.

## Chapter 42

"So you'll ride out to battle with us too," said Solon.

"Of course I will," said Tiburé. "And so will Alburé. Why would we not?"

Her husband shrugged, looking both bored and irritated as he generally did in her company these days. Against the long tapestries of the music hall he cut a fine, imposing figure. But an uninterested one.

"You managed to avoid the last battle up at the Outland Forts," he commented.

"I didn't avoid it," she said, trying not to sound irritated. "Huldarion asked me to come and stay in Kelvha to assess the situation here."

"And to lounge in comfort with the Lord Melegan and his foolish wife Sillier."

"Shildha."

"Ah. I understand it now," Solon said, raising a forefinger. "They're in disfavour, aren't they? Melegan and Sillier. They're in a hurry to leave Kelvha City, so I hear, before Nerogun can decide to have them taken into custody. So you've got to make alternative arrangements."

"There is that," said Tiburé evenly. She was determined not to lose her temper.

Poor Shildha, she thought; she doesn't understand what's happened – why her lovely lifestyle here is suddenly in jeopardy. It's all politics. Nerogun's using that girl's death to get rid of Melegan, just because he doesn't like him. It's true that Melegan's a vain and lazy man. Good-natured, though. An easy husband. Easier than some.

"Smile," she said. "We are supposed to be happily married."

"Nobody's watching us," said Solon.

"Oh, they are. All the time."

"You're paranoid," said Solon. "They're not interested in us, only in Huldarion. Why did you want to talk to me in any case?"

"For several reasons." She smiled because she was sure that amongst those equerries chattering over by the wall there would be at least one assigned by Nerogun to keep an eye on Solon. Nerogun himself stood blandly by the great ornamental fireplace, listening to the ancient Vizier. Or rather, not listening at all, but watching everyone.

She turned back to her husband. "Firstly, I'm worried about Alburé. She's been so sad since Gordal's death. She must have been more attached to him than I realised."

"Can't she make do with Sashel? I never could tell those twins apart."

Tiburé sighed inwardly. "Well, obviously she could. Please talk to her, Solon."

"I do talk to her, quite frequently. Weren't you aware of that? Maybe she doesn't choose to tell you about it, because she knows you'll only stick the knife in at any mention of me."

She was taken aback. "I've never done that, Solon. Not to our daughters."

"No, just to everybody else. What else did you want to talk about?"

"I..." No, this was definitely the wrong time. But there was no right time. And at least he could not shout at her, not here in the long hall surrounded by quietly conversing nobles. Although music was being played at one end of the room, not many people were paying attention to it. She saw Huldarion underneath the ornate banners that hung from the centre of the ceiling: he was surrounded by various High Lords all trying to get their word in. If he was bored or irritated he gave no sign of it.

Do it now: just say it, she ordered herself in exasperation. What's the worst that he can do?

"Solon, I would like an official divorce from you before we go to fight."

There; it was out. Worse than waiting for a battle. She was more afraid of Solon than she was of the stonemen. It was not from fear of any violence – for he had never raised a hand to her – but of his tongue. His displeasure. His dislike, because it was personal, as battle was not.

He stared across the room at the musicians, who were diligently performing to the uncaring audience. Only Yaret appeared to be actually listening to them. Next to her, Durba and Sina were talking earnestly together.

“Why now?” His voice was cold. “Ah. No, don’t tell me. It’s inheritance, isn’t it. So if you die I don’t get your money.”

“It’s not that,” she said wearily. “I would just like things to be clean-cut between us.”

“You mean that you would like the cut between us to be clean.”

“Surely that’s what you want too?”

“What I have always wanted,” he said, still gazing over at the music-players, “is a faithful, loving wife. And that is what I’ve never had.”

“I know we argued,” she said, with difficulty because she did not want to argue again and could see the way that this was heading.

“*You* argued,” said Solon. “I didn’t argue.”

“No, you made yourself as blank and unresponsive as a wall.”

He turned to look at her again. “A wall.”

“Stony,” she said. He was doing it again now, the granite glare. So different from Huldarion’s impassivity which retained a measured, considering manner. Solon’s stone-face was, to her, pure animosity.

“Whereas you, of course,” he drawled, “are all sweetness and delight.”

“I was never that, I know,” she said. “You never gave me the chance to be.”

“That sort of sideways mud-slinging merely proves my point.”

“Can we stop this unedifying way of talking? I would like an official divorce. All it will do is formalise the situation.”

“So who is it this time?” Solon asked.

“There’s no – that’s none of your business.” There was no use denying it, for he probably knew there was someone. Possibly he knew it was Theol. They had not exactly been discreet.

She wondered now if she had been wise to encourage Theol’s invitations. But it was such a relief to be with someone who did not always look for reasons to blame and shame. Someone who made life easier, not harder.

“It won’t last, you know,” said Solon almost carelessly. “They never do, do they? I wonder why that is.”

It is because I choose it so, she thought; but kept her mouth shut.

“You want to remarry?” he asked abruptly.

“Marry? No.”

“Ah. You just want the guilt-free bed, then. I don’t see why I should give it to you.”

“Generosity,” she said.

“To match your wonderful generosity to me, no doubt.”

“You were unfaithful just as much as me.”

“That would have been impossible. And your infidelities predated mine by years. By the time I strayed you could hardly call it straying.”

She thought that was probably true. There was no point in her saying, again, that his coldness and sneering jealousy had driven her away. Maybe she had deserved it after all. She knew that she was not an easy woman to live with.



"A divorce would set you free, Solon."

"Free," he said bitterly. "When have I ever been free? I am bound. But I *will* be free." He was looking away as if speaking not to her, but to the candlelit spaces of the hall.

She waited, and when he did not elaborate she said,

"Well, please think about it at least. Now let us talk of something else, and smile."

"Talk of what?"

"I don't know. These fires."

"Hardly cause for smiling," Solon said.

"No. But they are all the news just now. Maeneb told me that it was not the darkburn that caused the destruction of the northern quarter, as Nerogun would have us think, but arson. That the fires were set by Nerogun and Adon." Saying the final name left a sour dryness in her mouth.

Solon nodded. "It didn't take a genius to work that out. But it was bungled. Nerogun isn't half as clever as he thinks. He planned the fires as a distraction from the Lady Janeya's death. Laid waste to a significant area of his city, just for one self-indulgent woman."

"How can you know that?"

"The man is transparent."

"I would have thought that he is very dense," said Tiburé, glancing over at the Post-Regent's imperturbable bulk.

Solon laughed. "That too. And he's taking full advantage of the fire's effects: two thousand of the twenty thousand soldiers we've been promised are new recruits. Very new. Nerogun encouraged any young men made homeless to enlist."

Tiburé was shocked. "Recruits straight off the streets? They won't be much use in battle, surely?"

"No, of course not. But they're cheap: that's what matters more to Nerogun. Like I say, he's not as clever as he thinks."

She reflected that her husband had always considered himself the cleverest person in the room, no matter where the room was. It bemused her that she had ever found such assumption of superiority attractive.

"I wonder whether Nerogun is the spy," she said, and he immediately became grave again.

"The spy?"

"Whoever was listening to us in that day in the chart room. Or whoever had us listened to. Whoever passed the supposed secret word on to Adon."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, that. I have thought a lot about that. Huldarion has made no comment... but Nerogun's the obvious candidate. Yet it could be any of them. Personally I have reservations about Shargun."

"The Arch-Marshal of the army?"

"I was able to observe him at the Outland Forts up north, and he's a sly old lizard. He and Nerogun seem as thick as thieves but I don't think Nerogun wholly trusts him – with good reason. Nor do I."

"Who can be trusted in this castle?" she said, and sighed. "Ah, well, we had better circulate."

"Had enough of me already?" At once the bitterness was back. Or it had never gone away.

"I am merely thinking of what is diplomatic," she said with dignity, although Solon was quite right. Once she could not have enough of him. Now she found that preference almost inexplicable.

Yet not quite. If he would only talk to her properly, and set aside his acerbic superiority – as he had just now for a moment – she could still feel that pull. Or the memory of it.

She smiled, curtsied as if to a beloved husband and then moved away from him before they could annoy each other any further. Walking swiftly over to the musicians she joined the assortment of ladies gathered there. Maeneb and Gaelera stood some way distant from the rest, in silence – pretending to listen, she thought, in order to avoid the necessity of speaking. Gaelera had never said a word to her at this sort of occasion.

Instead of giving Gaelera the chance now, she went over to Durba and Sina. Their muttered conversation appeared more earnest – even vehement – than it had been before.

As soon as Tiburé came up to them Durba turned to appeal to her. “Sina must not ride out, must she? She has no idea of what would be involved. What it would be like. It is a terrible, a terrible...” Durba’s voice trailed away as if wanting to disappear and hide again.

Tiburé was startled. “Ride out? Whatever are you talking about?”

“Riding to battle. It would be dreadful for her!”

“It would be more dreadful for me not to be with you,” said Sina in her thin, breathy voice. She put out an appealing hand to take Durba’s.

Durba did not resist, although she said hoarsely, “But I don’t know if I myself can face another battle. It was – there was – it was too – I had a–”

As her voice faded to nothing, Sina clasped her hand still tighter. “There will be other tasks to do as well as fighting. Whatever you do, I will stand by your side. Together we are stronger.”

Durba bent and kissed her hand. Tears stood in her eyes.

Oh no, thought Tiburé with a sinking heart. Not this too. What an unneeded complication. Even if the Kelvhans don’t view attachments between women in the same light as they do those between men – since they don’t believe in them – we really do not need this.

“I think that for you to ride out to battle, my lady, is totally out of the question,” she told Sina severely.

“Why? I have horses,” objected Sina.

“But you have no training, no experience, no knowledge of what–”

“Janeya doesn’t have any of those either!” said Sina indignantly.

“Janeya? What do you mean? Janeya is dead.” Tiburé now felt thoroughly confused.

“Hush! She didn’t know,” said Durba to Sina with gentle compassion. “You must not say anything about Janeya, even to the Vonn.”

“I will say it to everyone if you don’t let me ride out with you,” said Sina stubbornly.

Tiburé was astonished. She had never seen the thin, subdued girl so animated. And she was equally astonished at what she now inferred.

“Sina – are you saying that Janeya is not dead as everyone believes? In that case, who died in her place?” She kept her voice down and her manner light, for she was aware of Gaelera’s silent presence some way behind her.

“A kitchen-maid died. Haemorrhage. An accident,” said Durba in a whisper. “The bodies were exchanged.”

Tiburé found her mind was whirling. “But then the two outcast serving-maids who took refuge in the women Riders’ quarters...” Maeneb had told her that much, but no more.

“One of them is not a serving-maid,” said Durba.

“And if she can ride out to battle, so can I,” Sina added.

“But this is... Who knows about this?” asked Tiburé, increasingly alarmed. “Does Huldarion know?”

Durba shook her head. She looked a little guilty, and scared. “Not unless Meya has told him.”

“What? Meya too?”

"She helped to organise Janeya's escape. But we haven't told any of the male Riders. Or many of the female ones either; only Delgeb guessed."

"Delgeb guessed," repeated Tiburé. "And she kept it to herself? Well, of course she did. She loves a risk."

"There is no risk," insisted Durba, "so long as nobody says anything." She turned to Sina. "And that includes you. Breathe a word of this and you have no chance of coming with us."

"Children, children," said Tiburé. "There is no chance of Sina accompanying us whatever happens. Your place is here, my lady, in the castle."

"And I will come back for you afterwards, and fetch you away," Durba promised. Tiburé did not try to contradict her; for that was a problem that could be dealt with later.

"I still don't see why I shouldn't come," said Sina. "Lots of the lords and ladies will follow the army in their carriages."

"A few High Lords and even fewer of their ladies – if any," Tiburé corrected her. "And it will be a long journey and a hard campaign, not just a weekend jaunt."

"But ladies often go to see the border battles."

Tiburé felt suddenly very tired. "I know they do. They seem to think the putting-down of a few ill-equipped rebels is entertainment. It is not. And what is coming is not a skirmish, it is not a question of a handful of unruly tribesmen who will be easily vanquished. It is war. Perhaps a long and difficult and bloody war. We do not know exactly what weapons our enemies may use against us, but we know they have some dreadful ones. And the High Lords who follow the train will stay at a very safe distance from any real fighting, believe me."

"Well, Idria is going to ride out with the army," Sina said defiantly. "And if the Princess can..."

"Idria?" Tiburé was thunderstruck. What on earth gave the girl that idea? "Naturally Prince Faldron will be at the forefront of his soldiers," she said, "but there is absolutely no necessity for his sister to accompany him. And I would say there is no chance of it either."

Seeing Sina's eyes suddenly widen, Tiburé realised that she had spoken more loudly than she intended. To her dismay she heard a new voice answering behind her.

"Idria may, if she wishes. There is precedent. But it seems to me unlikely."

It was Gaelera. Tiburé had not heard her approach. As she turned and said with a deep curtsy, "My Lady Gaelera," she thought, how did she stop those skirts from rustling? They rustle loudly enough at other times. How much had Gaelera heard?

"You will be wondering what else I have heard," said Gaelera without expression. "The answer is – nothing. Very little, at least, and none of it of any interest to my father. As for the Princess Idria, I had already gathered something of the sort, and it does not surprise me. Since the arrival of you Riders she has acquired a more adventurous spirit." She made her accustomed action as if to smooth out her embroidered skirts.

She means Sashel, Tiburé said to herself. The Princess Idria thinks herself in love with Sashel. Huldarion feared it had become too obvious. As for Sashel: well, Huldarion opined that Idria was to him as a kitten might be, diverting and attractive, but that the attraction showed signs of becoming something more. It was high time that Sashel was removed.

"The Princess cannot marry a mere Rider of the Vonn, of course," observed Gaelera. "Not unless he were of equal rank to Huldarion. I imagine that can never be the case?" She looked at Tiburé, who in her astonishment shook her head.

Gaelera clasped her hands against her bodice. On most other young women the gesture would have looked demure. On Gaelera it appeared as if she were preparing to pull out some secret weapon.

"So," she said. "In any case, I believe that other plans are in train for Princess Idria. You need not concern yourselves with them. But she will not ride out."

"And you, my lady?" enquired Durba. "You will not either, I presume?"

Gaelera put her head on one side. "I hold my father's concerns in my heart. I have a deep interest in all that he is doing. And also in the welfare of my country." She speaks, thought Tiburé, as if they were two quite separate things. "Therefore I may follow my father, later on, in the royal carriages. I believe the travelling accommodation can be made quite comfortable. But, my Lady Sina, to ride out with the horsemen of an army cannot be comfortable at all. I do not advise it."

With that, Gaelera made as if to walk away; but then she paused, and during a slight gap in the music, spoke again. Tiburé thought she saw some fleeting, unreadable expression cross the woman's face, yet her words were bland enough.

"I am informed that strange things were seen in the city yesterday. By many people, briefly. Did you observe them?"

"I... well, yes," said Durba cautiously. "There was, I think, some sort of wizardry... odd things popped out of nowhere."

Tiburé thought of her wedding ring which had appeared inexplicably on her windowsill. She had been tempted to open the window and throw it out, as she had once done many years ago, from a different window. But then she had gritted her teeth and picked it up, taking it as a missive – a reminder to try and talk to Solon.

"I myself observed a strange event within my chamber. My cupboard door flew open. A roll of cloth fell out and unwound itself along the floor." Gaelera was looking not at her listeners but somewhere past them. Instinctively Tiburé glanced round to see who was there; but it was only Nerogun and his hangers-on. "Fortunately I was alone," said Gaelera thoughtfully. She inclined her head and moved away; this time, with a continuous dry rustling of her ornate skirts.

I wish I knew that trick, thought Tiburé, to move without sound when I wish to in these awful dresses. Hers itched. And it always rustled.

"Do you think she heard everything?" whispered Durba.

"What she did not hear, she guessed," Tiburé answered drily. "Well, that was good advice she gave you, Lady Sina. I too would advise against any attempt at riding as a soldier."

Sina looked downcast. But further argument was thankfully forestalled, for the musicians struck up a new, louder tune.

Those instruments they played with sticks – called stibhults, as Tiburé recalled – were not altogether unpleasant, but the complex harmonies were quite beyond her. However, Yaret, nearby, was listening as intently as if she hoped somehow to memorise the music.

Tiburé moved away from the elaborate din to the quieter spot where Maeneb stood, now with Parthenal beside her. He must have taken pity on her isolation. And to be seen next to an attractive woman was advantageous to him also, Tiburé reflected.

Well, he would have to put up with an unattractive one too, for a bit. She was about to greet them when Maeneb spoke to her with some urgency.

"What did she tell you?"

"Who? The Lady Gaelera? She told us that Sina ought not to ride out with the army as the silly girl would like to do."

"She certainly should not," said Parthenal.

"Gaelera also said that she herself may accompany Nerogun in the carriages behind the troops. I have no idea why she would wish to do so."

"She may feel constricted in the castle," suggested Parthenal. "Can't say that I blame her."  
"It hasn't bothered her these last eight years," said Tiburé.

"I think she feels she needs to keep an eye upon her father," said Maeneb with some hesitation.

"She said something of the sort. An affectionate daughter." Although Tiburé spoke in light irony, she did not expect Maeneb's answer.

"She doesn't trust him."

Tiburé stared at Maeneb before remembering to appear nonchalant. She looked away and smiled as if at some joke before saying, "I should have thought that if anyone trusted Nerogun, it would be his daughter."

But Maeneb shook her head. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Gaelera told me that she fears her father will betray his country. She wanted me to warn Huldarion."

"And have you?"

"Yes."

"How did he react?"

"I don't know," Maeneb said. "I couldn't tell."

"Do you believe Gaelera?" asked Parthenal.

"I do," said Tiburé. "That man has no scruples."

"She has a grudge against her father," Maeneb murmured.

"Why?"

But Maeneb only shrugged.

"So are you Gaelera's friend now?" asked Tiburé in disbelief.

Maeneb paused. "I think I might be," she said, sounding worried.

By now it had become difficult to talk quietly, for the music was growing louder. There were multiple squawks from the stibhults, building up to some sort of climax. If she were musical, thought Tiburé, it would no doubt sound very fine; but since she was not, she preferred to retreat back down the hall.

There she caught Huldarion's eye. There were several things she would have liked to discuss with him, but too many lords still clustered round him at the moment. She would have happily talked to Uld, a thoughtful, courteous man, but he was in conversation with her husband. Should she join Theol, laughing easily with those lordlings underneath the vast brightness of the tapestry? No. Better not.

Prince Faldron was enjoying a joke with Aretor and Sashel: hearty laughter in that corner of the room. She looked for Princess Idria and saw her sitting amidst a bevy of the lesser ladies of the court. Not a glance towards Sashel. Good. She knows she's on display, thought Tiburé.

"Ah, Rothir," she said, with some relief. "How are you enjoying the music?"

"More now that it's finishing," said Rothir.

"You don't care for the stibhults?"

"Is that what they're called? I expect one on its own would be perfectly acceptable."

"Well, that one's finished at least," said Tiburé, for one of the musicians had laid down his instrument although the others were still working up to some raucous finale. The man stood up from his stool, seeming from his jerky movements to be in a hurry. He must be feeling ill, thought Tiburé, with some compassion, before the man began to run.

He ran, not for the door as she expected, but away from it, towards the group of nobles clustered round the Vizier and Nerogun. As he ran he reached inside his tunic and pulled out a dagger and brandished it, slashing at the air.

"What?" said Rothir, at once feeling for his sword. But he carried none on this informal evening: and neither, realised Tiburé, did the majority of men here, whether Kelvhan or Riders of the Vonn. There were shouts: the nobles scattered: somebody thrust Nerogun aside.

"Borgun! Borgun!" the musician yelled. He was young, wild-eyed, wild-haired, waving his knife frantically but seemingly without much purpose. Rothir sprang over a bench and ran towards him.

So did several others. Those closest to the man jumped back as he swiped his knife around indiscriminately: a Kelvhan equerry who tried to seize him fell backwards with a long gash in his arm. The music had ceased; one or two women screamed, to Tiburé's annoyance. Shouts and bellows for the guards rang out – where were the guards, she wondered? In the castle they were normally everywhere.

"Borgun! Borg–" The attacker's yells were cut off abruptly. Before Rothir could reach him, someone else had.

His head had just been slashed from his body. It thudded to the floor and rolled a short way, spouting blood onto the polished wood. More screams from various Kelvhan women. Oh, be quiet, thought Tiburé, looking for the man who'd done it.

He looked familiar. Modish yellow hair, fine clothes, a scowl beneath dark brows as he bent and wiped his sword clean on the dead man's clothing. Yes, she knew him. Dughin. Trust that man to carry a sword when others did not.

And now with a clattering rush through the doors the guards did arrive, too late – which worried her almost as much as the attack itself had – and hurried over to the bloodstained corpse. Nerogun strode out from the protection of the men around him and began to berate the guards. Did the Post-Regent look shaken? It was hard to tell. He certainly looked angry.

The musicians had all risen to their feet. Unlike Nerogun, they did look shaken by events – terrified, indeed, which Tiburé thought was understandable; she foresaw the interrogations which they would have to bear.

Yaret had been standing alongside the musicians, but now she quickly stepped away, for a number of the guard were stamping over to round them up. The soldiers pushed them roughly over to the door with many curses, kicking aside the lutines and stibhults that had been laid upon the floor, throwing down the fluttering sheets of music and trampling on them as they herded the players out at swordpoint. Making up for their lateness with this bullying behaviour, thought Tiburé. Once they were gone Yaret began to pick up the instruments and replace them carefully on the stools.

Tiburé looked back at the bloody corpse, which still lay untouched in an empty space of floor until Nerogun walked up to it and kicked it. He was talking forcefully, gesticulating to the other lords although she could not distinguish the words. Rothir pushed his way through the murmuring crowd to rejoin her, along with Parthenal.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" said Tiburé. "Who was the assassin aiming at? Nerogun?"

Rothir shook his head slowly, with a frown. "Unclear. Maybe everyone in general. He looked frenzied rather than focused. Huldarion has advised the Riders to stay back and keep well out of the affair."

"Good," said Tiburé.

Yaret came walking up the hall towards them. She was clutching several sheets of music, which were torn and trodden. Some bore dirty footprints.

"Are you trying to save those for the players?" Tiburé remarked. "Don't bother. Those poor men won't be coming back to perform for us any time soon."

"What will happen to--"

"No, don't ask," Tiburé said, shaking her head firmly.

"But the other players knew nothing about the man. He'd only just joined their group."

"What?" Rothir's frown deepened as he stared at Yaret.

"How can you know that?" said Parthenal.

"I spoke to a couple of the players just before the guards ran in. That man had only been with them a few days, they said, he didn't play very well, in fact he could barely play at all. But he was given the position by a noble, so they couldn't object."

"A lord? Which one? And why?" demanded Tiburé.

Yaret said quietly, "They didn't know which lord. But the young man used to be a stable-boy. This was a promotion. That's all they seemed to know."

By now the corpse and its detached head had been wrapped roughly in a sheet. The soldiers dragged it out, leaving a smeared red trail along the polished floor. The hubbub of raised voices began to grow muted, although nobody seemed to know quite what to do.

Yaret gazed over at the thin pool of blood, which people edged around without looking at it properly, as if it were not quite visible.

"He was just a boy," she said, in a sad murmur. "I kept noticing during the performance that he didn't play the same notes as the others. Most of the time he was just pretending. I put it down to nerves because he looked... quite terrified."

Rothir put a hand on her shoulder. "It was a swift death," he said.

"It was a very efficient death," said Tiburé. "And what I would like to know – apart from where the guards were at the crucial moment – is why he shouted nothing out, except the name Borgun."

## **Chapter 43**

Old Tanneries Street was, if anything, in an even worse state than it had been two days previously, despite the efforts that had been made to clear the area.

Tamu gazed around in sad despair. Several buildings had collapsed entirely – or, more likely, had been pulled down before they fell – while most of those that still stood upright had their doors and windows boarded up.

Yet people were still living in some. What a dreadful, chilly, hand-to-mouth existence they must have, he thought. The air around him stank of rotting food, raw sewage, and – above all – stale smoke.

A single cart stood in the middle of the street with a long dispirited queue snaking behind it. Four soldiers were distributing bread. No meat, no vegetables; not even the castle's leftover pastries. No blankets. No lamp oil. No fresh water. Their lives were difficult enough before: now they must be all but impossible.

Yet no-one in the queue said a word. This was because of the dozen further soldiers who patrolled the street: there not to help in clearing up, but to keep the people quiet.

And Tamu knew that this street was not even the worst. Somehow, during the fire, the river had been diverted to put out the flames round here before they could destroy the place entirely. But further south were half a dozen streets where nothing at all remained: grey wastelands of ash with the occasional black spar or pitiful remnant of a wall the only marker.

He knew this because he and Thoronal had just walked through them. Now he glanced up at Thoronal striding glumly alongside him. The Rider had hardly said a word since they had left the castle. Tamu had wanted to ask him about the assassination attempt in the music hall; rumours had been flying around. A madman, some said. A plot, asserted others, although it wasn't clear who might have been behind it.

Tamu longed to ask whether Parthenal had been there. He hungered to hear any word about Parthenal – the merest scrap of information would have been a treasure to him. When he had gone to find Huldarion in the stables, seeing Parthenal there had so unnerved him that he could barely speak at first. Yet Parthenal had smiled! And then Tamu had been terrified that somebody would realise how much that smile meant to him.

But nobody had noticed; because he was not noticeable. And now he repressed the urge to mention Parthenal. Instead he broke the silence to say, experimentally,

"A dreadful sight here, isn't it?"

Something between a grunt and a snort was the only answer. After a moment Thoronal muttered, "Dreadful." Tamu had the impression that his mind was on something else entirely.

"The poor people," he went on. "They had little enough before and now they have less."

Still no reply. Tamu tried again. "Well, I expect you have seen equally dreadful sights in your battles. Or on your travels. I know the Vonn have travelled widely."

Thoronal gave a long sigh. Then he said, abruptly, "How did you know about Parthenal?"

"What? How... how, what?"

"About his tendencies. His inclinations. The reason he was targeted by that equerry in the castle."

Tamu was almost dumb-struck. "I... it was... the man who, who, who was the equerry, Jaul... He is well-known. I mean, notorious."



"I see. So he knew about Parthenal. No need to wonder why." Thoronal heaved a deep sigh. "The problem is, Parthenal's my cousin. I'm the head of the house, so I try to keep him in line, but he's... incorrigible." He shook his head in exasperated gloom.

Tamu said nothing. He felt almost stunned. He had longed to hear Parthenal's name, and here it was, in abundance. Yet he was shocked that Thoronal would see fit to tell him this – if he was indeed telling him what he thought he was – for did the man not understand the danger of it here, within Kelvha city? Thoronal was obtuse.

"Promiscuous," said Thoronal heavily. "Any man will do."

Promiscuous. The word echoed around Tamu's head. Well, of course he is promiscuous, he thought. *Any man* is probably an exaggeration. But what man that way inclined would not want Parthenal? Who would say no to him?

Parthenal loves men, he realised; and now he found himself almost shaking with emotion: amazement and some unfamiliar delight. His thoughts tumbled over each other. Parthenal is promiscuous. I forgive him. It is natural for him. Parthenal loves many men. I wish I could be one of them. But *any man* would never include me.

He tried to get a grip on himself. No time to think about it now. Save it for later. Don't talk about it.

For he knew he needed to watch what he said. So he stayed silent as they walked down the wasteland of Old Tanneries Street, although a whirling sea of thoughts washed round him.

"Well, at least it came to nothing after all," said Thoronal. "I suppose I should thank you for that. Where is this manuscript seller?"

"Just here." The doorway of the bookshop had been boarded over; but the board was smashed. Tamu stepped over the pieces with a feeling of misgiving.

However, on entering the shop he immediately saw the owner, throwing sodden books and charred scrolls into a pile. The old man looked even more antique and fragile than his wares: his face was grey and hollow-eyed. He did not seem to recognise Tamu.

Filled with sympathy – for he could easily imagine how despairing he would feel were his own library to be laid waste – Tamu walked up and said to him gently, "Don't throw those away yet, please. We would like to buy some of your stock."

"Wait! We don't know that," objected Thoronal. "We haven't even looked at it yet."

"I'll have a look now," said Tamu. He knew that Thoronal was carrying at least two hundred drebs, and he was determined to find something here to make him spend it.

But when he returned to the spot where he had found his merchant's documents, and began to pick through the remaining blackened, crumbling scrolls, he quickly realised that his chances of finding anything of note were very slim. He replaced the parchments on the pile and went to hunt along the shelves, where Thoronal was gloomily picking up one volume after another and laying them down after a brief glance inside.

Tamu was on the point of telling him that none of those books was old or rare enough to be of interest – for you could easily see that by the bindings – but he bit back the words. At least it kept Thoronal occupied. He himself was looking for scrolls, not books, because they would be older. Unfortunately the shelves where he had previously stacked up the damp scrolls had been emptied, and he had to resort to hunting through the variety of parchments dumped anyhow in buckets or unravelling along the floor.

After a while he had found only one contender for anything of relevance: a copy of the Annals of Medrun, heavily stained and with a number of mistakes, but appearing to cover the High King's battles to the south with more detail than the version he was familiar with.

It was probably just fabulation on the part of the copyist (who had added his own pictures too, mostly of dogs) but it was enough to make it worth purchasing. He would offer forty drebs and hope the old man would try to haggle him up.

So Tamu made his way back through the piles of sodden books and rubble to the bookseller, only to find another customer already talking urgently to him.

"Nothing like that," the old man was saying, shaking his head. "No, no, I have no books like that. If I did, how would you expect me to find it? Look at the place!" He made a weak, despondent gesture.

"I see it, and I am truly sorry," said the other customer. He was a young man in long blue robes; bearded, with a thin serious face: and Tamu knew him. This was the priest whom he had seen being dragged out of the temple of Borgun by the mob after the fire, just up the road from here.

"What exactly are you looking for?" he asked the priest, chiefly because anyone searching for a book gained his immediate fellow-feeling. "I have been scouring these shelves and have an idea of what lies on some of them, at least."

"You tell him," the old man mumbled to Tamu. "You show him. Nothing left here. I don't suppose that you've managed to find anything you want."

"Indeed I have," said Tamu. "I will buy this scroll from you, for fifty drebs."

"Fifty?" said Thoronal, who was listening in.

"Please pay the man," said Tamu.

The priest's eyes widened slightly on hearing this exchange. "You value parchments highly," he said in wonder.

"This one I do," said Tamu. "It's a copy of an antique chronicle of Kelvhan kings, most likely at least three centuries old. I am the assistant archivist of the castle, so I know about such things."

"An archivist? Do you know ancient scripts? Perhaps you can help me find what I want here," said the priest. "I came to seek any books or information about strange alphabets."

"What sort of alphabets?" asked Tamu, instantly intrigued.

"I don't know. I have found some writing that I do not recognise, on – on an artefact which has lately come to light within my temple. That is the temple of Borgun, my Lord of the Vonn," the priest added, with a deferential bow to Thoronal, "which your master Lord Huldarion defended only the other day. For that, I am extremely grateful. My name is Hokiro, priest of Borgun."

"Well," said Thoronal, seeming almost at a loss.

What an ungracious, clumsy man, thought Tamu. Why on earth did Huldarion appoint him as a counsellor? Since Thoronal said no more, he spoke for him.

"As castle archivist, I will be happy to take a look at this artefact of yours," he told Hokiro. "I can at least inform you if the script is one I recognise. Would you like us to come to the temple with you now?"

The priest's face brightened. "If you please. It's only a few minutes' walk." He began to lead the way out of the shop.

"Wait a minute," said Thoronal. "I have something to ask you first. Do you have followers in the castle?"

Hokiro stopped in the doorway. "Followers? I myself have followers nowhere. Borgun has followers everywhere, if that is what you mean."

"Including in the castle?"

"Perhaps. I do not ask all those who worship in the temple whence they came."

"Is any of your followers a stable-boy?"

"It is possible," said the priest patiently, "that one of Borgun's followers may be; but I would not know." He began to stride up the ashy street, after a moment adding over his shoulder, "I can tell you only that there are not many boys among our worshippers. Not many are even as young as I am."

"And how old are you?" asked Tamu, hurrying to keep up.

"I am thirty."

"That's young for a priest," said Thoronal.

"Are your priests older, then?"

"We have no priests among the Vonn," said Thoronal, somewhat loftily.

Hokiro inclined his head politely, without comment. After that he did not speak but strode purposefully past the piles of litter and the listless queue behind the bread cart, to the temple door. Only once they had all gone through it did he again turn to address Thoronal.

"Perhaps you would wish to tell the Lord Huldarion that no-one with his image has been seen here lately; not since the last occasion."

"Veron keeps an eye on such things," said Thoronal cryptically. Tamu had no idea what they were talking about, but Hokiro nodded as if he understood. He walked ahead of them down an uneven, sloping aisle between rows of benches, all unpopulated, and stopped in front of three well-worn statues which raised their wooden faces to the uncertain light that leaked in through the door.

"Borgun," he said, bowing to the statues. "Our protector. Healer of all ills." Behind the statues lay a row of half a dozen long shapes covered with cloths. The smell of smoke and decay was strong in here: it gripped Tamu's throat. He had an idea that underneath the cloths lay bodies, guarded against intruders by the statues as well as by the soldier at the door. Clasp his hands, he touched them to his forehead in a gesture of respect.

"Will this take long?" said Thoronal, and Tamu winced. Quite apart from the reverence due to the dead, the man should know how to behave inside a temple even if the Vonn had no temples of their own.

Tamu himself was familiar with the story of Borgun – it was well-documented in the archives – and felt the solemn weight of history and tradition here. He was aware that he felt also some affinity with the followers, the outcast, the injured, the disfigured and disabled.

For am I not abnormal in the eyes of Kelvha? he reflected sadly. Am I not a monster, morally deformed, according to their laws? And I am injured accordingly. Not by my own nature, but by their response to it.

For the first time in his life he felt indignation at his Kelvhan masters, as well as fear. But the fear would always be there. Kelvha would not change. Tamu stared at the statue on the right, which depicted an aged man with one arm uplifted, and thought of Parthenal: so straight and tall, holding his sword up to the sky.

Oh, give me a way out of here, I beg you, give me a way out! he pleaded silently, meaning a way out not from the temple but from Kelvha, or at least the crippling chains of Kelvhan customs. Or maybe from himself.

He sighed, and said aloud, "Where is the artefact you spoke of?"

"It is down here." Leaving the statues, the priest walked in increasing shadow to a curtained alcove at the back of the deep, narrow building. The rough dark stones rose high above them in a windowless wall.

"This cell is where I store my robes of office," Hokiro said, drawing aside the black curtain. "And this is where, after the inexplicable fire and flood, a greater wonder than either of those happened. For the inner stones fell down: and this was revealed behind them, within the very wall of Borgun's temple."

Tamu could see nothing in the alcove until Hokirolit the lamps that hung on either side. Then something gleamed into existence: a golden harvest moon, no, half a moon; until in the growing lamplight it became transformed into a half-sun. It stood huge and gleaming in the alcove's tiny sky.

It was, he realised, a great bowl. Although it shone it was not smooth; for it was inscribed with writing all around its outer side. Almost two feet in diameter, it rested on a stone shelf built within the thickness of the temple wall. On the floor around it more stones lay tumbled.

"Borgun has revealed this chalice to us," the priest whispered. "I heard the concealing stones fall even though nobody had touched them. It is the lost hand of Borgun that has cast them aside."

"What a marvellous thing," said Tamu in wonder.

"Is it gold?" Thoronal sounded dazed.

"Perhaps," replied the priest. "It is certainly very heavy."

"It looks like a wine bowl. A ceremonial one," said Thoronal.

"A libation bowl," Hokirol said. "Restored to its rightful place within the temple by the grace and mercy of Borgun."

"Maybe the heat of the fires caused the wall to crack and fall away," murmured Thoronal. The priest was silent.

Tamu gazed at the bowl. The inscription fascinated him. It was beautifully done: a masterpiece of engraving, with three lines of graceful cursive writing threading around the outside of the bowl. At first sight, he thought it was a script unknown to him; yet certain letters looked familiar. There was some sort of stamp or seal beneath the lines of writing.

"May I touch it?"

When the priest nodded, Tamu put up a hand to try and turn the bowl a little. But it was indeed too heavy for him to move alone. Hokirol assisted him in lifting it down and placing it upon a small high table – a lectern, probably – which stood at the alcove's side. The bowl seemed to whisper with faint echoes as they removed their hands.

There Tamu inspected it more closely. The writing went all the way around the outer side. Yes, there were definite similarities to the Ondial script, or Pre-Ondial rather, although Tamu had never seen it written with this degree of ornamentation. It was, he thought, quite beautiful.

He looked inside the bowl: just three words were written in its base. He studied them for a moment while the priest looked on and Thoronal ran a finger along the bowl's edge. It sang faintly like a remote bell and Thoronal, alarmed, withdrew his hand abruptly.

"It is a holy sound. It is like the ringing of the golden sphere of Borgun," said the priest reverently, "that he beheld within his courtyard, with his eye that was destroyed."

But Tamu, still studying the writing, smiled with growing pleasure. "I can read these three inner words, at least," he said. "And they are not in Kelvhan."

"Not Kelvhan?" The priest's voice held some dismay.

"I think the language is not so different to antique Standard, although the vowels have shifted somewhat. In modern Standard those three words inside the bowl would say: *Honour. Care. Fidelity.*"

"What?" said Thoronal in shock. "But those are the watchwords of the Vonn! *Honour, care, fidelity* is written along the back of the royal throne."

"Caervonn's throne?" Hokirol asked.

"Yes. Those words are our rule and maxim. Tamu, can you read the rest?"

"Let me see," said Tamu. He was determined not to be hurried, and unmoved by Thoronal's evident shock. *Honour, care, fidelity* might be anybody's watchwords. They certainly ought to be.

"Paper and a pen would help," he suggested to Hokiuro, who hurried out to fetch them. When the priest returned, he held one of the lamps over the bowl, while Tamu began to carefully write down the words in Standard script. Many of them looked strange; but not all that strange. Definitely a dialect of antique Standard. It was most interesting.

Thoronal looked on, frowning, as Tamu studied the bowl, deciphered, wrote down the transcription: and studied the bowl again. Recognising a few words of Old Standard, he read them out. "This line says, in an ancient dialect, the bowl was '*made to mark their victory in battle*'."

He read the line out as it was written – despite its links to Standard, when spoken it sounded like another language altogether – and then saw Thoronal draw back in shock.

"But this is not possible," said Thoronal hoarsely. "That language. It's Vonnish, as near as makes no odds. How can that be?"

"It's ancient Standard, so the languages are probably related," Tamu began to explain. But at the same time Hokiuro spoke.

"Ah, perhaps it is because the Vonn were here," he said solemnly. "Eight hundred years ago at the founding of Kelvha City, the Vonn were here. They rode behind their king all the way from Caervonn, to aid the High King of Kelvha – as he was later known. It's in the history books."

"It is indeed," said Tamu, still peering and deciphering. "But it's most unlikely that the Vonn were in this very spot."

"On the contrary," said Hokiuro unexpectedly, "it is extremely likely. For this building – which is now the temple of Borgun – was once the palace of that first king."

"It was what?" At that, Tamu straightened up to stare at him incredulously. "There is nothing in the archives about that."

"I dare say not. The Lords of Kelvha prefer to forget their humble origins. They do not like to be associated with the poverty and squalor of the northern quarter. And they did not stay here for long. None the less," the priest said gravely, "according to the lore handed down by the temple priests, these stones were once the earliest palace walls."

Tamu stood open-mouthed and stared at him, meanwhile running through the chronicles in his head, and pondering.

It was certainly possible. The earliest chronicles were all copies; even the oldest had been written a full hundred years after the founding of Kelvha City. They were vague about exactly where that first monarch, Khal-Arethgun, had made his residence, before his son began to build the castle that now dominated the centre of the city.

But the northern quarter was the city's oldest part. And the temple was one of very few stone buildings within it. Tamu studied the massive thickness of the wall which had until so recently held close the chalice. The breadth of the walls, their roughly hewn great stones, the temple's height and depth, and the smallness of its narrow windows were all consistent with the design of ancient clan halls. It was a fascinating thought.

"Can you read the rest of the inscription?" asked Thoronal, part impatient, part ingratiating.

"Please rotate the bowl," said Tamu, and as the others did so, he carefully traced the lines of the archaic notation. "Not solid gold, I think," he said, writing down the words of the engraving, "but a layer of gold with silver underneath. The lettering stands out because the exposed silver has become tarnished."

"Really? Not solid gold?" Thoronal sounded disappointed.

"It is an exquisite piece of craftsmanship," said Tamu, somewhat reprovably. "This stamp underneath the writing might be a silver-smith's." He rubbed it carefully with his sleeve before peering at the bowl more closely. "Why, no," he announced with fresh delight, "this is the King's Stamp of those early days. Khal-Arethgun's own sealing mark, impressed into the metal! Well. I have only seen this mark three times before. This dates the bowl to those early times without the slightest doubt!"

"But can you read the writing?" asked Thoronal.

"I think so. Now then." Tamu studied the inscription he had copied down. Certainly an unusual form of antique Standard; but all the words were guessable. He began to read his transcription aloud, substituting the modern version of the words for the ancient ones where necessary.

*"This – talking? no, chanting – bowl made to mark their victory in battle is given by Dorial, of Caervonn sole sovereign–"*

"Ah!" said Thoronal, with an indrawn breath.

*"–to Khal-Arethgun, chief of the land of East Kelv, to mark their alliance and... joint? just? glory in the defeat of the lawless tribes of south Kelv. And on this day Khal-Arethgun is named High Lord and Governor of this province beneath the–"* Tamu stopped abruptly.

"What? It doesn't finish there, does it?" demanded Thoronal.

"I – I can't make the rest out," stammered Tamu.

"Let me see," said Hoki, who had been following Tamu's finger on the paper. "The next word merely repeats what is said on the line above, does it not? *Beneath the sole sovereign of Caervonn and of East Kelv, Dorial.* Oh." He stared at the paper and then at the bowl. "So it predates Borgun by four hundred years," he said sadly.

Tamu would have wanted to laugh had he not been so terrified.

"Wait a minute," said Thoronal. "Khal-Arethgun was High Lord under King Dorial? Dorial was his master? Caervonn ruled Kelvha?"

"It may be a figure of speech," said Tamu miserably. "There is nothing about it in the chronicles." The later chroniclers would have made very sure of that, he thought. He swallowed. "The best thing you can do is wall it up again."

"Wall it up? But it is a thing of beauty," said the priest. "And Borgun revealed it to me for a reason." He put out a hand and rang a reverent finger very lightly along the golden rim. Again the bowl sang, with a deep, quivering note that took several seconds to die away completely. The sound was entrancing.

Yet Tamu knew that this bowl – or, rather, its engraving – was, for all its grace and beauty, a potential firebomb.

That inscription! Saying that the chief of Kelvha was subject to the rule of Caervonn! And his unmistakable embossed seal was stamped beneath it!

The chaos and discord this could cause, thought Tamu in horror and dismay, would be worse than any darkburn – worse by far. It could lead to war. The High Kings of Kelvha to be discovered not to be High Kings at all, but merely governors? Underneath Caervonn?

"Oh no no no," he said, in panic. "You have to wall this up again!"

"We need to take it to Huldarion," said Thoronal firmly. "As the descendent of King Dorial, it should belong to him."

Tamu was about to object that if it belonged to anyone, it was to High Prince Faldron: but his horror increased at the thought of what might then ensue.

"But – but the, the lords of Kelvha – Nerogun, Prince Faldron, they must never know about this bowl! Wall it up again, wall it up, I beg of you!" he exhorted the priest desperately.

"There is no reason why they should not know about it," declared Thoronal.

"But the wording! Its significance!" How could Thoronal not see how explosive this inscription was?

The Rider merely pursed his lips. "All the more reason to give it to Huldarion. And then maybe we can use it if Nerogun becomes difficult."

"Difficult? That is hardly the word for how he would react to this," said Tamu, appalled and desperate. "Please, I beg of you, Hokiro! Do not permit this bowl to be removed! Let it stay hidden in the temple, as it has been for so long!"

The priest looked from face to face, his brow creased in doubt. "Borgun revealed the sacred bowl to me," he said. "I pray that I may see the reason for it with the lost eye of Borgun. May his knowledge fall on me." Laying his hands upon the bowl, he closed his eyes. Nobody spoke.

Slowly he reopened them.

"Borgun tells me that our time is now at hand," he announced soberly. "The coming of the Vonn marks indeed the coming of our freedom. And the finding of this wondrous object shows that we poor, neglected, despised citizens of the temple are not bound to Kelvha's Kings, but to Caervonn. To Huldarion. Let us take him the bowl."

## **Chapter 44**

Huldarion had shut Meya out, and he knew she did not like it. She sat in frowning state in the next tent, no doubt smouldering slightly. She had been smouldering, it seemed, for days, and Huldarion did not know why. His brief meetings with her were too public for him to ask her what the matter was. Second thoughts about her marriage, probably, now that the test of war came close. Her moodiness disturbed him more than the prospect of battle.

And it was not just Meya's moodiness that was disturbing. He had the constant sense of matters being decided just beyond his grasp, of secrets whispered just outside his hearing.

That is the problem with castle life, he thought: all those spies and listeners are inducing paranoia in me – some of it justified, undoubtedly; but I do not know how much.

Tonight, however – his final night in this place of strange concealments – would be spent not in the castle, but outside the city walls, in the tents pitched by the South Gate where the forces of the Vonn were mustering. His tented city of Thield had re-encamped itself a mere two miles away, and half a dozen tents had been placed here by the gate, for himself and some of his men.

Just now Huldarion was very glad of it. Ironical that these flimsy walls of cloth should be so much more secure than the thick stones of Kelvha Castle. But here, in the swirling wind, even the sentries a few yards away outside his tent could not hear what was being said within.

And what was currently being said was astonishing to him. Uld and Solon, he could see, were equally astounded. They gazed in wonder at the golden bowl that had been set upon the table.

The little archivist Tamu had ceased his stammering explanation and now looked as if he wanted to sink into the ground. Not surprisingly, thought Huldarion. Tamu could never take this bowl and its inscription back to present it to the Keeper of the Scrolls or any other lord. It would cause consternation. The archivist would be instantly out of a job – or worse.

But beside Tamu, Thoronal and the solemn, thin-faced priest were waiting in intense expectation for his judgement.

"We can use this," Thoronal suggested.

"How?" asked Huldarion. It was not an academic question. This great, gleaming bowl told him that Caervonn had the right to rule over Kelvha – in theory: but there were lots of ifs attached. If the bowl was genuine, if Tamu's transcription was correct, if that right had never been superseded by some later, equally arcane decision. If Kelvha would accept it: which they would never do.

"It could be a lever if the Kelvhan lords fall short in their aid to us," said Thoronal. "Or if they try to go too far and take some of Caervonn's lands for their own."

At this Solon stirred. "Have you any knowledge that Kelvha intend to do so?"

"Having acquired some knowledge of Kelvha and its rulers these last two weeks," said Thoronal, "I would not be surprised."

Huldarion considered this. "I know why you say that, yet I think perhaps you underestimate the integrity of Kelvha: of its military chiefs, at least. Honour holds as high a part in their morality as in our own."

"But Nerogun has his own morality," said Solon.

Huldarion thought about what Maeneb had said to him: that even Nerogun's own daughter had doubts of his commitment to Caervonn. And what of Leor's report, that the Post-Regent was in league with Adon?



No, Nerogun was not to be trusted. Yet it was too late to pull out of this alliance now – indeed, without the help of Kelvha there was little chance of defeating the stonemen and the darkburns. The stonemen that Adon controlled...

But Huldarion strongly suspected that Nerogun had no more loyalty to Adon than he had to Huldarion himself. The Post-Regent was a pragmatist: he would ally himself to anyone who served his purpose. Most likely he would be happy to see the stoneman threat to Kelvha nullified. Once that was done, though, who knew what Nerogun would want?

Well, I am a pragmatist myself, thought Huldarion. We are united against the stonemen and the darkburns, for the moment. And Nerogun's power and influence will soon wane, once Faldron becomes High King. It is Faldron I must seek to cultivate.

He looked at the little archivist, who was growing increasingly nervous.

"Tamu; I thank you for your help and expertise," he said courteously. "You will wish to return now to your work within the castle."

"Not really," said Tamu. "I mean – I – what will you do with the bowl? If they know that I... What do I tell them?"

"Tell them nothing," ordered Thoronal. "No-one in the castle needs to know."

Huldarion cast him a slightly exasperated glance, thinking, For stars' sake, man! It should be obvious to Thoronal that if any use were to be made of the bowl – or even if its discovery were publicised, by the priest, for instance – then Tamu's position would become very uncomfortable. To say the least.

"You brought some other documents for us, I see," he said to the archivist.

"Yes, I – in the shop – old chronicles – but I've, but I've not read them yet, they're just a, probably of no importance..."

"Then please take them with you into the next tent," said Huldarion, feeling compassion for the man's anxiety. "The Lady Meya is in there. Refreshments have been served. Feel free to partake of those, and have a look through your chronicles to see if there is anything of relevance to us. You need not mention this bowl to Lady Meya. We can talk again a little later."

The idea of keeping Lady Meya company did not make Tamu look any happier. All the same he ducked his head obediently before he scurried out.

Once he was gone Huldarion looked at the priest, who up till now had waited patiently, saying little except to explain the miracle by which he had found the hidden bowl. From the awed way in which he spoke it was clear that he had no prior knowledge of the thing's existence; and that he regarded its discovery as a divine act by the hand of Borgun.

"What would you have me do with this?" Huldarion asked him now – not because he felt inclined to follow advice from a priest, but purely out of curiosity.

"It is yours, my Lord of the Vonn," the priest answered, looking at him over the shining bowl. "It is for you to judge. I ask only that wherever you go, wherever you take the sacred chalice, I shall now go also, for it is written here that you are the master of the ancient fort of Kelvha and of the temple of Borgun."

"Is it not written here on this object that I am master of all Kelvha?" Huldarion asked him.

"Perhaps. I do not understand the politics of it. But it is certain that you are the master of the temple of Borgun."

"Well," Huldarion said. "I see. May I ask you also to step outside the tent for a little while? I will speak to you again shortly."

The priest bowed and left.

Thoronal laughed. "So now he wants to leave his temple – and do what? Worship you instead of his old statues? Join the army? Fight the stonemen? Because of a dish!"

"Because of his beliefs. The question still remains," said Huldarion, "what to do with this." He put out his scarred left hand and tapped the side of the bowl.

Then he stepped back in amazement. For the bowl gave out a low, ringing note – no, two, three notes, no, more, all sounding out at different levels. The note that was many notes seemed to pulse and prow around the tent before fading slowly into silence.

"My word. If you hit that with a mallet it could summon an army," said Uld after a moment.

"I expect it could." Huldarion brushed the edge of the metal with his sleeve. The same note whispered, circling. It fascinated him.

"I do not recall ever seeing such a thing in Caervonn," he said musingly. "The question is, do we take it with us? The alternatives are: to present it to the Kelvhans; to replace it in the temple of Borgun and wall it up; to hide or bury it elsewhere."

"The first could be extremely controversial," warned Uld. "It would jeopardise the whole relationship."

"I agree. We keep this artefact from Kelvha."

"The priest will not allow us to do the second thing, to wall it up again," said Thoronal. "He would have it unwallled as soon as we were gone. He is a stubborn man, not to say bone-headed."

"And if we bury it, then anyone could dig it up," said Solon.

Huldarion nodded. "Again, I agree. I think the best thing we can do is take it with us; but wrapped up, well concealed. It can go in one of the carts with the tents."

"And then we can always use it against Kelvha if it becomes necessary," added Thoronal.

"I do not know what you mean by *use it*. Do you mean, flourish it in their faces and say, You belong to us? That would be a swift road to war." Huldarion knew that he spoke sternly. But had Thoronal no sense?

It seemed not, these days; ever since that battle in the south where he had lost his confidence, Thoronal had also lost his judgement. Or maybe he no longer trusted his own judgement, and that was why he threw out rash, unconsidered ideas. Huldarion had sent him with Tamu to the area of devastation, hoping it might help to reawaken his humanity; rouse his compassion. It seemed it had not worked. Thoronal had not even mentioned the plight of the northern quarter.

I shall have to replace him, thought Huldarion. Find another counsellor. But not yet. There is no need just now.

He picked up one of the woollen rugs that lay folded on the couch behind him, and threw it over the bowl. Even once hidden it seemed to linger, glowing, in his mind: such a lovely object, beautiful to look at and to hear. A fitting heirloom for the rulers of Caervonn.

"By the favour of the stars, one day this will grace our palace," he told his counsellors. "But first we have to get there. There is much to do."

So he put thoughts of the bowl aside to attend to other pressing matters. The four of them went through the allotted tasks of the muster – the final organisation of arms, horses and provisions – and the three counsellors left to set about those duties.

Huldarion walked out of the tent behind them.

"Let no-one enter," he instructed the sentries. The priest waited a few yards away, his arms folded in his sleeves. Huldarion looked him in the eye, assessing him keenly. A young man; but his lean, wistful, slightly haggard face spoke of years of hardship and of longing.

"Hokiro. I do not regard myself as your lord," said Huldarion, "nor are you beholden to me in any way. Rather I am greatly beholden to you, for bringing this vessel to me."

"I heard it sing just a little while ago," the priest said yearningly. "I heard the voice of sky and earth together."

"Indeed. Truly a remarkable sound. But it will not sing again while it is here."

"What will you do with it?" asked Hoki-ro.

"I will take it with us when we travel. I will keep it secret, and well-guarded."

The priest inclined his head. "Then may I ask to be the one who guards it?"

This was a solution which had already occurred to Huldarion. "Are you determined to go whither I and my people go?"

"I am. Borgun commands it."

"But what about your temple?"

"I shall appoint a deputy."

"I think you would not wish to be a soldier."

"I will not bear arms. But I do not seek to prevent others from bearing them in a just cause. And I have some skill in medicine," said the priest, "which I can offer in your service."

"Have you a horse?"

"I will find one." The man's eyes were alight now, with hope and conviction.

"Then I accept that service from you, both as a healer and as a guardian of the bowl, until either of us shall ask to end the contract." A strangely formal conversation, thought Huldarion, but this priest seemed to inspire seriousness and respect. He suspected that Hoki-ro would follow him in any case, with or without permission; so the permission might as well be given.

He put out his right hand expecting it to be lightly taken and then dropped, as was the Kelvhan custom. Instead the priest reached for his other hand as well, the scarred along with the whole, and clasped them both together in his own. Then, releasing them, he raised his hand to touch Huldarion's forehead, where the scars began, in a gesture of gentle blessing.

"Borgun," he said. He turned and walked away, leaving Huldarion both moved and faintly uneasy.

Well, what's done is done, he told himself. The man is hardly likely to convert my army wholesale to pacifism. And he has compassion, which should lead him to care well for the wounded. Another medic will be useful.

So with this reflection he went over to the tent where Meya was awaiting him. He suspected that Meya would not be content either at being kept waiting, or at the company she had been forced to keep; for Tibur  and a couple of maids had offered to sit with her, rather than leave her rudely on her own. He knew that Meya was wary of Tibur , being uncertain of her joint position as a Rider and as a lady of the castle. And she would regard Tamu, he thought, as very much beneath her rank and notice.

But as he walked in, he thought in surprise, why no, I have misjudged her. For Meya was sitting next to Tamu and talking to him with kindly animation. No sign of moodiness. She looked up at Huldarion and spoke with calm assurance.

"My lord. I have just recommended to the Assistant Keeper of the Scrolls that he should take some respite from his labours and pay a long overdue visit to his mother in Outer Kelvha."

"I am sure that is a good idea," said Huldarion, as Tamu, looking almost overwhelmed, began to stammer out words of gratitude in a tone of deep relief.

This matter of the bowl has scared him more than I had realised, thought Huldarion. But I trust that he has told Meya nothing of it.

Meya continued. "Master Tamu, I shall speak to the Keeper of the Scrolls myself; you need not approach him. I shall inform him of a family emergency. I expect you are owed at least a month of leave. Are you not?"

It was a command, not a question. "I – I – I, possibly, Lady Meya. It would be a... I am indebted to you."

Meya patted his hand. "Then you should set out as soon as possible. Off you go and pack your things," she said, as if she were his grandmother. In fact they were probably about the same age.

"Before you leave us," said Huldarion. "That other matter, of the inscription that you found, Tamu. We will bear it in mind. However, you need take no further action." As he spoke he was aware that he sounded over-lordly.

"Thank you," said Tamu. "I will – I would like – if it were permitted–"

"Yes?"

"I will check these last few parchments before I go," said Tamu with a gasp, and almost ran out of the tent.

Huldarion watched him leave with an inward smile. It was unfair of him to feel amusement, he knew, at a man so timid and yet trying so hard to be of use.

"What inspired you to offer him a holiday?" he asked Meya.

She gave a shrug. "I have always liked Tamu. He works hard, and he knows his place. It struck me that lately he has been over-working. He said nothing of his business here, but he looked tired and even over-wrought. Was it an important inscription that he brought to you?"

He shrugged in his turn. "Something the priest had turned up. I don't think it's directly relevant to our purpose."

Meya nodded, not that interested after all, to his relief. Instead she turned to Tiburé. "Well," she said, "I suppose that we had better tell him now."

Huldarion sat down on the stool opposite them, his relief switching back to wariness.

"Tell me what?"

Another doubt about our marriage? he wondered. But, no, it cannot be; for she would not talk about such things in front of Tiburé. Perhaps there was after all some other reason for her strangely haughty moods.

Meya looked up at him, both troubled and faintly embarrassed. "My lord. I must confess that I have been deceiving you. For I – Oh! That sounds all wrong!"

"It certainly does," said Tiburé drily. "You will give him entirely the wrong impression. Why not leave it to Piril to explain?"

To Huldarion's surprise the maid who had been hovering behind them stepped forward. Her head had been bowed, but now she raised it and looked him in the eye as she spoke directly, without any fluttering curtsy or nervous preamble.

"My lady Meya means to say, sir, that your lady Riders have been harbouring me and another maidservant in their lodgings without your knowledge, which was something Lady Meya asked them to do, sir."

"Harbouring you? Let me think a moment," said Huldarion, feeling grateful that it was nothing more important. "You are a maid from the castle? But not Lady Meya's maid."

"No, sir, I was Lady Janeya's chambermaid." The girl spoke quietly but was unabashed. An inconspicuous girl. If she had accompanied Janeya at the banquet, he did not remember. But now he understood her presence.

"Ah. I was grieved indeed at Lady Janeya's sudden death." Indeed, although he had been told it was a suicide the circumstances were a mystery to him, and he had not had any private moment since then with Meya in which he could ask her about it.

He sincerely hoped the death had nothing to do with his choice of bride, when he had effectively turned Janeya down. Although he had been sure that Janeya did not wish to marry him – having her eye on another man – perhaps her relatives had felt differently. He did not pretend to understand the pressures brought to bear upon the marriageable young ladies of the castle; yet he could imagine that if Janeya had been forbidden to marry whatever young lord she had chosen, she might have been driven to destroy herself.

And he could readily believe that Janeya's maids would be made convenient scapegoats. "You were in trouble after her death?" he asked Piril.

"Yes, sir. The Lord Post-Regent was very angry with us when poor Lady Janeya was found to have killed herself, although it happened while we were sleeping, sir. We had no idea that she intended it. The Lady Meya arranged for us – that is, for me and another maidservant – to flee the castle. The ladies of your company have been most kind to us, sir. We would like to ride out with them, if you would permit us, sir."

"As far as Outer Kelvha," put in Meya, with a stern look at Piril. "And then you can make your own way to your home village, can you not, Piril?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"So," said Huldarion. "I am deceived indeed." Had all the women Riders in the city kept this from him? That was disconcerting. But he understood why they might hide the maids: so that if they were discovered, he could truthfully deny all knowledge of the matter. "I am glad you have found my fellow Riders so hospitable. However, I admit I would have preferred not to have known of this deceit until we were well clear of Kelvha."

"Oh, sir, may I stay with the lady Riders until then?"

"What alternative have I? I am not going to cast you back to Nerogun." He was torn between compassion and mild annoyance. "But one thing I wonder. Why do you choose to tell me now?"

"Because Master Tamu recognised the other maid, sir," said Piril, "when he came into the tent before."

Huldarion looked around. "Ah, I see. Where is she gone?" For there was no sign of the second maid.

"She went out. She was upset," said Meya, who herself now seemed a little irritated. "But that is enough of maidservants. My Lord Huldarion, there was another, more pressing reason why we wished to speak to you."

"It concerns last night's assassin, at the music hall," Tiburé added.

"Another sad event," said Huldarion gravely. "The man was very young, and I suspect deranged. But he need not have been slaughtered so abruptly."

"Sir," said Piril, very quietly, "sir, if you please, he was my brother."

## Chapter 45

Huldarion turned and lit the lantern hanging from the roof, for twilight was falling. It gave the maid time to rearrange her face. When he turned back she was once more almost composed.

"Your brother?"

The girl nodded. "Keril." She said the name sadly, like a farewell.

"How old was Keril?"

"Seventeen," said Piril. "I was supposed to be looking after him while he was in the castle." Her voice shook slightly, but only for a second.

"Tell me about your brother," Huldarion said gently.

"He came to the castle two years ago, sir, to work as a footman – although he wasn't much good at it – he was too untidy. So after a while they put him in the stables. It was hard for me to keep an eye on him there. But I soon learnt that he had been shown favours by a lord called Jaul."

"I know the man," said Huldarion. He could already see the way this was going, and to give her a little more time he asked her, "How long have you worked in the castle, Piril?"

"Ten years, sir, since I was fourteen. So I know how things are. I know the rules. I know it's meant to be forbidden – what Jaul and the others did." She took a long breath. "I mean, they bedded my brother. I had not known that Keril was that way inclined but when I taxed him with it he didn't seem averse. They paid him."

"I see," said Huldarion.

"He hadn't told me, sir, but rumours spread inside the castle, amongst the servants. Keril thought I would be shocked. But it happens all the time with the women. The low-born ones, I mean, the maids. Except we don't generally get paid. So I wasn't all that shocked. But I was scared for him." Her hands were tightly clasped together.

He nodded, not wanting to interrupt her.

"And – then – I learnt that they were trying to blackmail him."

He waited. "Who are *they* in that?" he asked eventually. "Do you mean Jaul?"

"I mean Iajo, sir, the armourer. And, and..."

"She means the Post-Regent," Tiburé put in. Meya compressed her lips. Piril stared at the ground. There was a many-patterned rug laid down beneath their feet but it did not keep the damp out.

"So; when your brother made his attack in the concert hall last night – you think he turned on his blackmailers?" said Huldarion. "And attempted to kill Nerogun?"

She shook her head vehemently. "No, sir, no, he would not do that. It was not at all in his nature. There was no violence in him."

"There was, last night," he countered.

"Sir. Pardon me, but no. Keril would not harm an ant. I am certain of this. So. I have – I have heard – something of what happens to men, servants I mean, who do what Keril did with other men and who are discovered by the wrong people, or fall out of favour." She looked up at him briefly before staring at the rug again. "It is a horrible death, sir."

"You need not go into detail," Meya said. "Continue."

"Ma'am. I believe they threatened Keril with this – this penalty, and gave him an alternative. To pretend to attack Nerogun and the other nobles. Keril must have known he would not reach the Post-Regent or anyone else with his knife before he was cut down. I

think – I think he was relying on the guards to cut him down. To give him a quick death. The Lady Tiburé tells me it was quick.”

“He died instantly,” said Tiburé. “He would have had no time to be aware of any pain.”

Piril nodded. Her face clenched again, momentarily, as tightly as her hands. Then she had it under control: as impassive as Huldarion knew he was himself. To show no emotion, thought Huldarion, must be a lesson quickly learnt by servants in the castle,

“That is true,” he reassured her. “It was extremely swift. But how can you be sure that Keril did not do it of his own accord? Even if only in the hope that he would be cut down quickly, as you say.”

“Sir.” She looked up at him again. Such an ordinary, forgettable face. Such an unforgettable story. “Sir, I know because Keril had only lately joined the band of players. They did not know him and they would not have employed him were it up to them. He played the stibhult a bit back home, but not well. The players said he was given the position by a noble. They did not know which one.”

“So he was given a position with close access to the lords,” said Huldarion.

“And the guards were strangely late to arrive,” Tiburé added. “The danger to Nerogun was increased. Yet I can’t say that he looked alarmed.”

“He never does,” said Meya.

Huldarion nodded slowly. “I also noted that about the guards. Piril: I thank you for this information. So you and your fellow-maid intend to leave the castle and to ride with us to Outer Kelvha? I believe that might be wise.”

“Oh, sir. May I ride beyond that? May I join your band of women?”

He looked at the maid’s plain face. She has the courage, he thought, the self-possession, the endurance, probably the strength. “Can you ride?”

“A little.”

“Well,” said Huldarion. “Let’s get you safely outside Kelvha first. Then we shall see.”

The maid curtsied and departed from the tent, as did Tiburé. He was left alone at last with Meya, whose face was set in contemplation. But he could not guess her thoughts.

“That is quite a story. What do you make of it?” he asked her.

“Do I think that bodged assassination was staged? Yes, almost certainly,” she said firmly. “The man looked terrified. He knew that he was going to die. But it was not clear who he was aiming for. And as for the agent who directed him – I am at a loss.”

“Nerogun staging an attempt on his own life?”

“Perhaps. But why, I do not know.”

“Unless to show the castle how indispensable he is, how diligently he needs to be protected for the castle’s sake.”

“He already has the army at his command.”

“Not quite,” Huldarion said. “They have other commanders whom they value more. And you saw that recent mutiny against Nerogun’s intransigence.”

“Yes... that is true.” Meya looked concerned. “I don’t like Nerogun, but he is generally efficient. It worries me that the guard were so extremely slow to answer to the summons. Nerogun was put at real risk. I should hate to see civil discord within Kelvha.”

“We have no reason to think that is likely,” he told her. “Although I admit that I am glad to be outside the castle for this final night. All these secrets that I have to keep from Nerogun weigh on my mind.”

“Secrets?”

The bowl had been in his thoughts, but he gestured at the doorway. "The presence of the two maidservants. The fact that Tamu is leaving suddenly... It was generous of you to offer to arrange that for him, by the way."

Meya shrugged. "I'm not afraid of the Keeper of the Scrolls. He'll be put out, of course, but that's too bad. Huldarion: to other, more important matters. I came to you this evening for several reasons."

"And what are those?"

"Partly because of Piril, obviously, but also because I need to talk to you about the matter of – can we be overheard here?"

"No. These tents are surprisingly sound-proof."

"Are they? I heard a strange sound earlier, a ringing, like a bell."

"You may speak freely here," he said.

"Very well. I need to tell you about Prince Faldron's wine. I have had no chance till now." Despite his assurance that the tent was sound-proof, she lowered her voice to a murmur. He moved the stool over to her chair, glad to have an excuse to sit closer to her. From here he could feel the warmth of her body. "You were correct in your suspicions," Meya told him. Her voice was faintly husky; low, alluring.

"There was indeed something in the wine?"

"Yes. I spoke to the steward, Greshal. I think he already suspected some misdoing on the part of Faldron's valet and was glad of the chance to tell me without fear of retribution. He let me into the servant's quarters. In there I found a flask, containing a liquid that was colourless and odourless, but with a faint sour taste. It was not water. I decanted three quarters of the contents into a bottle, and used water to top up the flask."

He nodded. "I presumed that what I drank that evening was diluted. One quarter strength, you said. I think I still felt some faint effect: a pleasant passivity, you might call it. Do you have any idea what the potion was?"

"I believe it contained the same ingredient as the stonemen's drug; the medicine that you call Athelid." He caught his breath as she continued. "Your herb-mistress Shebel had brought some of the Athelid paste to my own herb-mistress to see if she could identify it. She was unfamiliar with it, but the two drugs do appear to be the same."

"Where is the bottle that you filled from the suspect flask?"

"In the still-room, under a new layer of dust, along with twenty other similar bottles." She paused. "If someone were found to have been poisoning the Prince, that would be high treason."

"But they could argue that it was not poison. It did him no physical harm, after all. It merely made him more... amenable. Who could have been responsible? Not just the manservant, presumably."

"Greshal said the manservant had been hired by Nerogun."

Huldarion nodded. No surprise there. Another servant hired to do the dirty work and take the blame. "What about Greshal? Is he reliable?"

"Yes. Greshal does not like the secrets he is obliged to keep, yet he keeps them well and faithfully," she said. "He is a careful, loyal man. Loyal to me, at least."

"*Honour, care, fidelity,*" murmured Huldarion.

"Yes, he has all those." She looked at him. "Is that a motto?"

"You might call it that. Those are the three chief watchwords of the Vonn."

She mused. He could tell she was saying the words again, internally, but could not tell what she was thinking.



Will I ever be able to read her thoughts, he wondered, if she should choose to stay with me? He breathed in her scent, deeply, surreptitiously. It was not just whatever flowered soap she used, but the faint scent of her body, of herself. He found one question was now uppermost in his mind; and it was not *What is Nerogun's aim?* It was not even *Will you still marry me?* It was whether she would stay with him that night.

"Fidelity," she said musingly. "I feel that I show little of that to Kelvha at the moment."

"Nerogun is not the same as Kelvha. You owe no faithfulness to him."

"I know that. But I meant... Ah, well." She looked around at her surroundings. No breeze blew through the double thickness of the walls; as well as the rug underfoot, the seats were laid with folded, plain wool rugs. "I did not realise you were already quartered in your tents."

"They are comfortable tents," said Huldarion with a smile.

Meya raised an eyebrow. "Not too bad. But this has not the luxury of a Kelvhan camp."

"That is certainly true. I visited Faldron's quarters by the battlefield. Luxury indeed."

"Naturally. Our travelling carriages are well-equipped. I expect I shall be comfortable enough when I follow you in the entourage."

"You mean to come with us, then?" Although he had not expected it, he found that he was very glad; it showed her commitment to his cause, and to Caervonn. And other comforts came to mind.

"I shall not ride beside your soldiers," she went on. "That would not be fitting for me. But my carriage shall follow you; indeed, until we come close to the battlefield, I shall journey alongside you. Why not? Where else should I be but with my husband?" And she looked at him directly, if still unsmilingly. "I am your wife already, in my own mind, and I hope in yours."

He took her hand; but she withdrew it. Then she took a folded sheet of paper from her cloak.

"Also," she said, "I have another reason to wishing to leave the city for a while – a more selfish one, I must confess. I want to see my daughter. Look; she sent me this picture of some ducks."

Huldarion unfolded the piece of paper. Ducks were recognisable, just. He smiled.

"Aliya is staying in Outer Kelvha," added Meya, "not too far from your route south-east, as I understand. She is living in the country with a noble family. Unfortunately, they are connections of Lord Melegan."

"Ah. And Melegan is in trouble, I believe."

"He is in exile."

"What? So soon?" Huldarion was shocked.

"It has all happened very quickly and I don't fully understand why. It may be that Melegan will retreat to that same country residence. I don't know. But whether or not, Aliya cannot stay there. She has a nurse, of course, but the nurse has no standing of her own and naturally, no house in which to lodge."

"I see. Other arrangements can be made, for both Aliya and her nurse." Olbeth, he thought; a familiar image, so long harboured with affection. But lately he had put away all thoughts of Olbeth. "I know of somewhere – so long as you do not require a mansion for your daughter, but merely a comfortable and spacious farmhouse."

Meya smiled, a little bleakly. "Will it have ducks?"

"If not, some shall be purchased," he promised her. When he took her hand again, she did not withdraw it. Her skin was warm and smooth.

"The final reason for my visit here was.... But I had really hoped to find you still in the privacy of your castle chamber," she said wistfully.

"Not in a tent?" His heart leapt in anticipation of her meaning.

She glanced around. "Everyone will know."

"Everyone knows anyway," said Huldarion, "and at least no one will be listening at any spyholes. But wait here and eat with us. And then you can decide if you will stay."

"Oh, I have decided," Meya said. And she leant towards him, and rested her head upon his shoulder.

So they did not wait till after dinner. Huldarion had still many things to organise; but this took precedence. He drew the screens across the tent and dimmed the lamp a little, but not entirely, for this time he desired to see as well as feel her, and Meya did not object.

She touched him tentatively at first, almost as if she had never touched her husband in this way: stroking him gently, not avoiding the scars, but learning him as he learnt her. For she allowed him – and then led him – to touch her everywhere he wished. And everywhere, her body felt entirely wonderful beneath his hands.

It is not exactly worship that I feel, he thought; and yet I venerate this body, so soft, so firm, so full, so responsive. It is another Meya altogether.

Her body was a delight to him, far more than his could be to her. Yet she did not seem to mind the scars and he felt his own unremitting awareness of them lessen.

Their love-making on the canvas camp-bed was slightly awkward, for she was concerned not to make too much noise: it was almost silent, ceremonious, and, for him, entirely satisfactory. He let Meya guide him as to what she wanted and made sure that she was not left hungry. If she gave a little less of herself than the first time – there was no exchange of confidences, no suspicion of a giggle even when the bed threatened to tip them off – it did not seem to matter.

As he held her while her body shivered into stillness he thought, this is the true sealing of our pact. May I treat her always with honour, care, fidelity. I already love this body, this other half of her.

Even so, there is no love between us two; not much, at least, not yet. Love is not mentioned on the bowl. It is not one of the watchwords of the Vonn. Our fourth, unwritten watchword is not *love*: it is *accord*. Yet love may spring from honour, care, fidelity, accord; and they all spring from love.

All these secrets, he reflected, the many secrets Kelvha keeps. I have my own secret now, from her. I have the bowl. Yet it is through my honour, my care for her, fidelity to her and to her people and my own, the necessity for our accord, that I will keep it secret.

Again he spoke the watchwords in his mind. And before they rose again, and dressed, and went to eat, while he still lay wrapped around her in languorous half-sleep, he heard in his imagination that long, insistent, ringing that had emanated from the silver bowl. That community of notes made one.

A plea, a prayer, a call: a summons to the bowl's home. To Caervonn.

## Chapter 46

"Thank the stars," said Rothir, and he laughed aloud. He knew it was uncharacteristic of him, and he didn't care. Parthenal, riding alongside him, raised an eyebrow.

"You're that thankful to be free of Kelvha?"

"Aren't you?" Rothir glanced around at the long train of carts and Riders that led all the way behind him to the South Gate of the city. Those walls looked very small now. Toy walls and a child's model of a gate.

A thin pall of smoke still hung over the city's furthest quarter, yet here the air was clean and fresh. He drank it in deeply. They were passing the villages and farms of Inner Kelvha, the little fields shining green with new spring crops. Small birds flocked overhead in shifting bands and filled the morning with their cries, an attractive jingle of faint see-saw bells; Rothir realised only now how much he had missed birdsong in the city.

The good cheer behind him in the Vonnish train seemed general. A mile or two away, the even longer train of the Kelvhan army was still forming itself. Rothir knew that inevitable hardship lay ahead, to say nothing of the predictable brutalities of war; yet for all that, he relished this moment of departure. To feel the steady hoofbeats of Narba thudding underneath him, to have his comrades all around him, to know that he would soon be visiting his sister Olbeth and her household – however briefly – all these were reasons to rejoice.

"I suppose I'm glad enough to leave," said Parthenal flatly.

"You don't sound glad. But then you've been living in the lap of luxury while the rest of us have slumped it in the town. You'll miss the comfort. I won't miss anything except the pies."

"Things did not go well," said Parthenal.

"Some things."

"Quite major things. That tournament which nearly got you killed."

"But didn't," said Rothir.

"That poor girl's suicide, after Huldarion chose a different bride. That must have been quite horrible for him."

"I think her death saddened him," said Rothir, "but we don't really know its cause."

"Still. And the assassin just the other night. That was strange, and quite disturbing. And the fires rampaging through the northern quarter – no matter who started them, the effect was as terrible as if it really were a darkburn. And then to learn that it was Adon! And that he has allied himself to Nerogun!"

"Don't talk about Adon now. It's too fine a day." Rothir shook his head to dispel any such thoughts. For this one morning he wanted to be free of worry.

"But what of the disappearance of the darkburn? What if Huldarion learns about your part in that?"

"No reason why he should," said Rothir. "So long as you don't tell." The destruction of the darkburn was still a secret that was known – he hoped – only to those few concerned. He glanced over to where Leor and Veron rode side by side with the shaggy fur-clad hunters talking and laughing in their wake.

And in front of them all, at the head of the line, rode Huldarion. One cause for celebration there, at least.

"Some things went well," Rothir insisted. "The most important things. Mission accomplished for Huldarion – he has his wife, and his alliance. I wasn't sure that Lady Meya would hold to the bargain once it came to leaving Kelvha. When they came out of that tent last night I felt that we should all have cheered."

He was not the only one who had had to repress a grin whilst walking past the tent on his way to dine: it was perfectly obvious to everyone what Huldarion and Meya had been doing. Even though Meya had comported herself with distant dignity, Huldarion had worn a certain air of... what was it? Ease. Satisfaction. Lucky man.

Still there was no response from Parthenal, which surprised Rothir until he remembered the gruesome tale of the assassin's identity, which Huldarion, in sombre tones, had told his senior Riders after dinner. The story of that poor servant-boy would have touched a nerve in Parthenal's tough heart, if anything could. Occasionally Rothir did wonder: had his friend ever truly loved? Or had he simply desired?

Well, for that matter, have I ever truly loved? he mused. I don't think it was love I felt for Gwenna. Although right now, riding out on Narba to certain battle and an unknown destiny, I feel as though I could love anyone.

As for desire... well, there was none allowed in Kelvha – except for Huldarion. More chance for all of us now, but even with the city shrinking fast behind us, who could I ask? Shebel: she's kind enough, but... can be a little patronising. Naileb. A bit bland. And she's from Olbeth's household, so better to steer clear. Felba. Always liked her. But she's my second cousin and more like an older sister than a potential mate.

He glanced behind him for inspiration. Maeneb. No. Not unless he wanted to be knifed. Durba. No chance, even if she weren't too young.

In any case Rothir had always told himself he wouldn't bed any woman that he wouldn't be prepared to marry. He must have been less choosy in those days, he thought, because he didn't care for the idea of marrying any of the women he had just been considering in such an egotistical way.

And egotistical it was, for why would any of those women have him anyway? He saw a sudden image of himself as if he were gazing at the line of Riders from ten feet up in the air: a man broad-shouldered, wind-tanned, frowning, with none of the eye-catching good looks of Parthenal; grim, though probably looking considerably grimmer than he felt. Not much there to attract women.

So wait for Caervonn. Perhaps she would be waiting too, as she had been for so many years in his imagination.

Rothir glanced again behind him and saw Yaret – her appearance, as usual, more male than female; more boy-like, anyway. Hard to imagine trying to bed her. Not because he didn't like her, for he liked her very much: but because it would ruin a good and valued friendship.

All that history between them. Near-death and disaster. He did not know what to do with some of it. That dead boy in the infirmary: her head on his shoulder in the chilly fort. Her knowledge of the huntress. Singing to darkburns. It bewildered him.

And that strange vision he had seen, while standing in the ruins of the northern quarter. He had been aware of what she called the lin, blinking stubbornly in and out of sight – but what had momentarily kept him spell-bound was the woman he had seen appear behind Yaret. Round her: almost part of her. Shining somehow. Like Yaret and yet not like her. He did not understand it. No, best keep Yaret separate.

But those two women riding just behind her – who were they? He didn't recognise that pair. They must be the castle maids whom Huldarion had mentioned: Piril and Jebil, those were the names. Poor girls. He hoped they had friends somewhere in Outer Kelvha who would give them refuge.

On peering further down the line, to his surprise he saw two more new faces. These ones were not maids, but men; and one of them at least was quite familiar.

"There's the archivist," he exclaimed. "What's he doing in our train?"

That woke Parthenal up. He craned his head around. "What? Our little friend Tamu? Where is he?"

"Next to that cart, along with the thin man with the hollow eyes."

"Oh, I see him now. He doesn't look too comfortable there, does he? Timid little Tamu. But fancy him following us out here. I wonder why?"

"I expect he's visiting somewhere on our route and will drop out of the line soon," said Rothir.

"Probably... That hollow-eyed man next to him, that's the priest of Borgun's temple," remarked Parthenal. "I saw him on the day of the fires, when Huldarion defended him from the wrath of the crowd. He must have attached himself to Huldarion out of gratitude."

"As long as he doesn't try to convert him."

"I doubt if he'd be capable of that," said Parthenal, sounding somewhat more like himself. He waved to a couple of women who were cantering up from behind to join them. "Alburé," he said, as they drew level. "You're looking quite different to the last time I saw you."

Alburé smiled. Although different, she looked equally fine: her riding-breeches and brown tunic became her just as well as the sleek embroidered dresses she had worn in Kelvha Castle.

But she's not the one for me either, thought Rothir. When will I find the one who is? Still, at least Alburé was smiling, which was good. Someone else relieved to be escaping Kelvha.

"Olbeth will be glad to see you," he told her.

"Olbeth? She won't be joining our army, will she?" asked Alburé in some surprise.

"No, not with the baby. But Huldarion says that we'll pass close by her farm and encamp there for a day or two while we reprovision."

"Olbeth is your sister, I believe?" That question was from Yaret, who had ridden up with Alburé. She looked like a true Rider of the Vonn, if not as strikingly well-dressed a one as Alburé; nor did she have the other woman's air of proud assertiveness. But Yaret seemed at ease on Poda, who was practically prancing with the joy of being out with all the other horses.

"She's my younger sister. I remember the wincing with which you first leant to ride on Narba," Rothir remarked to her.

"And then you made me gallop full pelt on Poda all the way from the Gyr Tarn to that crag you called the thumb."

"I did. It was cruel, but necessary."

"You should have seen the look she gave me when she arrived," said Parthenal.

"Dishevelled," said Yaret. "I had no idea where I was or who I was looking for."

"Well, our route from Kelvha will not be so lonely, nor should it seem so unfamiliar," Rothir told her. "After we leave Olbeth's farm we will skirt south of that plain you called the loft. We may even glimpse the escarpment from where you can look down upon the Darkburn forest."

"The Darkburn," said Yaret thoughtfully, and he knew that she was remembering – as he was – those early days together, as they had tried to care for the wounded Rider Eled.

Such dark days those had been – in part: and yet at other times, he had felt something quite strange. Almost joy. He recalled a golden sunset. The relief of Eled being found.

That had been before the dreadful moment high above the River Thore. The memory of that still cut him to the bone although he had no idea why. Because here they were all safe and sound and on their way.

“And after that,” said Yaret, “where do we go then? Towards Caervonn?”

“Not directly, no. Much depends upon the news the scouts bring in,” he answered. “But Huldarion’s intention is, I understand, to head south first: towards the sea.”

“The sea,” repeated Yaret, as she gazed ahead. An attractive prospect lay immediately before them. Thicketed woods – the Kelvhan hunting forests – replaced the placid farmland; and beyond those, another twenty miles away or more, the hills put up their round grey heads to watch the Riders’ coming.

More cantering hooves approached them. This time it was Veron, leading Leor and Ikelder.

“The horses need a run,” called out Veron as he rode past, “and so do I.” With that he urged his wiry horse to a gallop and pounded on up the line. Leor and Ikelder followed him, Leor looking startled on his bony steed Bryddesda as if he had no idea why he was galloping. His red hair streamed behind him like an untidy flag.

“And so do I too,” said Parthenal. “Alburé?” She nodded, and they began to canter after the others.

Rothir looked at Yaret. “Shall we gallop?”

“Are we allowed?”

“Huldarion is smiling. He’ll be joining us in few minutes, I expect. Glad to leave Kelvha behind. We all are, I think.”

“We take Kelvha with us,” said Yaret, “along with every other moment of our lives. We take it all with us. But yes, let’s gallop.”

Poda and Narba needed no spurring. They eagerly stretched out their necks, vying with each other for speed before their riders brought them side by side.

The ground swept past beneath them; a flock of birds flew overhead, at first accompanying them; and then were finally left far behind, as the Riders galloped east and south, towards the sea.

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### ***End of Book 3***

***The tale continues in  
Darkburn Book 4: The Haunt of Terns***

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