

THE CARTOGRAPHER'S CHRONICLES:

BOOK I

by

Charles Thomas Plummer

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STATEMENT OF THESIS APPROVAL

The following faculty members served as the supervisory committee chair and members for the thesis of Charles Thomas Plummer.

Dates at right indicate the members' approval of the thesis.

<u>Melanie Rae Thon</u> , Chair	<u>12/4/2013</u> Date Approved
<u>Michael Mejia</u> , Member	<u>12/4/2013</u> Date Approved
<u>Thomas Stillinger</u> , Member	<u>12/4/2013</u> Date Approved

The thesis has also been approved by Barry Weller

Chair of the Department/School/College of English

and by David B. Kieda, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

From the unnatural long lives of Old Testament prophets and Gandalf the Grey, to the immortality of Elves and The Highlander, I am fascinated by stories of longevity and immortality. I chose medieval fantasy as a genre to answer my own question about immortality: How far into hell can seven people take a world and still hope to be redeemed?

The day Sylva's favorite student graduates from his military training, she is murdered in her home. An investigation ensues. When her student, Ustin, sees her alive the next morning, the investigation turns into a "man-hunt" for the victim. Sylva has survived her own murder. For Ustin, this means traveling outside his homeland with the menacing Prince Endegar. For Sylva, it may mean dying all over again.

The novel spans three weeks and thousands of years, from the age in which The Six were first made immortal, to the day Sylva is found by her husband and pupil, only to be lost again. In the time leading up to that day, Ustin must decide what kind of man he will become. When he realizes what his backwoods warrior-society has turned him into, he seeks an alternative to the violent culture from which he comes.

Ustin lives in a microcosm created to protect its inhabitants from a world that struggles against a cycle of its own natural and unnatural destruction. The Six ruled for thousands of years, testing every method of dictatorial government. When cataclysms

occurred, The Six were sure to survive and lead the remainder of humanity into the next cycle of destruction. The vacuum created when they choose to leave ruling and live in obscurity has the power to destroy the world yet again. Through a mixture of chance and choice, Ustin, Sylva, and Endegar become players in the world struggle for redemption.



The World

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CHAPTER 1

THE PRACTICE YARD

Midmorning sun lit the abstract pillar of stone that rose a thousand paces above the jungle floor. It cast its shadow northwest toward the similarly sized cliffs that encompassed the fen. Some thought the pillar resembled an hourglass that had been stretched through the middle and flattened on both ends. Others thought it looked like the hilt of a weapon, but everything reminded the *Fenpela* of a weapon. The city of Kelkaam perched on the towering stone like a nest for a flightless people. They had made the fen and its pillar their home since the end of the Age of Necromancy—an age remembered in the traditions of the *Fenpela*, even if its relevance had been lost. Windows and balconies speckled the pillar beneath the city where layers had been carved out of the stone when the upper surface became too crowded for a tribe that had become a civilization.

The original practice yard at the top of Kelkaam sat near the city's center open to the air and sun. Shadows from the linden trees that surrounded the ring crept in and out of the yard throughout the day. The spring blossoms of the linden trees were a season-oasis above a desert of evergreens knowing only wet and dry for the passing of time. Training amongst the blossoms was like fighting in perfume. At least until the fermented odor of sweaty teenagers filled the ring. Sylva Seawood leaned on a wooden practice sword

waiting for her solo appointment. The weight of her hand and hip drove the point into the ground while she toed the dirt with her boot. The sun warmed her face and her leathers. Mornings in the yards were reserved for those not old enough to join the guard. This morning she would train her favorite student for close to the last time.

“Arms Master Sylva,” a boy called through the opening in the trees. “May I approach?”

Sylva gave a wry smile at the boy with the constellation of adolescence on his face. He wore his wavy, black hair pulled back like most *Fenpela* during training. Sometimes Sylva thought about cropping her straight, sandy hair just to make her differences that much more pronounced. Ustin lived on one of the lower levels of the city. He had been one of her students since he started the sword at age eight. There were other training yards closer to his home, but Ustin claimed he preferred the open-air yard surrounded by trees to the balcony plazas surrounded by rock and fungi. Sylva suspected he liked practicing with the foreign woman. “Young Master Ustin, approach.”

Ustin was a week away from eligibility to join the guard as a messenger. She thought he must be getting impatient to win his first strike pin. Most of his peers had won their pins by going to the lower rings, but he seemed determined to win his from Sylva. She stood up straight as Ustin walked to meet her in the center of the enclosure. He held his own practice sword and was dressed ready to spar in padded leather armor with gloves to match. During Sylva’s time in the Bayside kingdom, she would have assumed that Ustin was a nobleman’s son outfitted as he was, but there were no noblemen in Kelkaam. All men and women served in the guard for some period of time regardless of their situation, and this type of equipment was issued to everyone over eight years of age. Ustin stood a

pace in front of Sylva and waited for her to decide on his training for the day. She raised her practice sword in front of her. “Practice positions.”

Sylva started all of her students’ practices with the rudiments of swordplay. Most youth his age groaned when she made them start this way, but Ustin never complained no matter how basic the training. Nor did he complain when she sent him home with bruises up and down his body. Sylva had never heard Ustin be anything but respectful. He was eager to learn, too. On more than one occasion he had shown up sick. Sylva worked him until he turned green; she sent him home only if he vomited.

They crossed practice blades in the prescribed motions with their feet in fighter’s stance. After five rotations through the *perpleg*, the foundation blades or first engagements as they were called, they circled round each other. They repeated the *perpleg*, concentrating on the movement of their feet. First they made a full circle with the sun and then a full circle against the sun. Clockwise and counter-clockwise, Sylva thought, as they would say in the big cities of the continent, where they have such things. Once the circles were made, Sylva and Ustin continued the *perpleg* in a line—first with Sylva moving forward and Ustin backward, then the opposite direction. Once they were back in the center of the ring they started over using *dwopleg*, or second engagement. They continued this through all ten engagements of the *Pektong*.

By the end of the tenth engagement, sweat polished Ustin’s skin to a shiny bronze—except the red spots that threatened to scar his cheeks before he had a chance to get scarred in battle. Sylva’s own skin was fairer than the *Fenpela*’s with a nasty nick to one side of her chin from their enemies in the southern mountains. Without rest Sylva called out “*Aldfen*” then stood defensively allowing Ustin to attack first. Ustin whirled into a

wild attack common to the *Aldfen* style that only the *Fenpela* and the mountain peoples practiced. The erratic movements of *Aldfen* appeared desperate to the strictest followers of *Pektong*. But *Aldfen* could be most effective against such an opponent. It gave the appearance of leaving a fighter open to a strike, but the openings were more like feints, even taunts, built right into the style. Her husband, Endegar, had taught it to her when they first met in Bayside kingdom. It was how she had beaten Prince Harold of that kingdom in her first duel. Actually she had beaten him by using her own mixture of *Aldfen* and *Pektong* that surprised even Endegar, though he would never admit it. Ustin's obvious self-discipline had led Sylva to believe that he would excel at *Pektong*, but flounder with *Aldfen*. He had proven her wrong years before. When she told Endegar of the assumption she had made about Ustin, Endegar explained that *Aldfen* was a part of the *Fenpela*—not just as a fighting style, but in the people. It had made sense to Sylva; the *Fenpela* could be erratic. But the fen society dealt with its social chaos in an orderly manner. Peculiarity in the eyes of outsiders was common in Kelkaam. It was outsiders who were rare.

Now Ustin whirled away at her, or so it appeared. His sword blurred as he twisted it around from his wrist, allowing the weight of the blade to create its own momentum. Then he locked his wrist and put the force of a true strike behind it. Sylva blocked and made her own strike which Ustin blocked. Her sword was now twirling as well. This was not a drill like the ten engagements of the *Pektong*. Once a student knew the basics of *Aldfen*, student and arms master would spar to first touch. This meant years of bruises for young students, but all students had to achieve first touch with a practice sword on an arms master to be admitted to the guard.

Ustin pressed Sylva with a series of weak attacks, forcing her to step backwards. Then he stopped his feet. When she made to strike back, he struck first. She managed to block, but he had unbalanced her.

“Excellent,” she said as she stepped back to regain her footing. He kept at her. Again he tried a series of weak attacks to move her back, but this time Sylva made an aggressive defense by returning a strike with each parry. She made them stronger strikes with each consecutive block until Ustin was backing up.

“Those tricks will only work once in a fight,” She cautioned. But just as Ustin looked as if he would lose his balance, he caught himself and kicked at Sylva’s legs. She had to move quickly to avoid being tripped. Ustin had lulled her into a sense of false confidence by feigning to be a one-trick opponent. The second attempt had been a ruse to get her to move more aggressively toward him. “Very nice.”

Sylva began mixing in *Pektong* with the *Aldfen*. She stopped whirling her blade and took a traditional defensive crouch. When Ustin came in with his blade twirling she blocked with *Pektong* then twirled into *Aldfen* for an attack. Ustin blocked Sylva’s *Aldfen* attack with a series of *Pektong* parries typically used against multiple opponents. This allowed him to block the attack and then connect with her sword while she moved to twirl it again. Instead of being able to go back to an *Aldfen* defense, Sylva’s blade was knocked wide leaving her exposed with Ustin’s blade on the inside. To avoid the kill shot, Sylva swept Ustin’s legs with her foot. Ustin tumbled to the ground. This was the first time Sylva had been forced to achieve first touch on Ustin with something other than a killing strike.

Ustin lay panting in the dust of the practice ring with a toothy grin. Sylva grinned back, then extended her arm to help him up. “You had some brilliant tactics there. I’ve never seen you ruse someone like that. Have you been holding out on me all this time?”

“No, arms master,” Ustin said. His smile faded. “It’s a new trick I just tried yesterday.”

“I watched you spar with young master Oren yesterday. I didn’t see you try anything like that.”

Ustin’s grin was gone now. He looked uncomfortable. “Well, it was something I tried after I left your ring.”

Sylva narrowed her eyes. “You haven’t been double practicing, have you? It’s dangerous for someone your age to be driven by two trainers when one doesn’t know about the other.”

“No, arms master, please. It’s nothing like that.” Ustin looked stricken by the accusation. “I was goaded.”

For the third time in only a few minutes Ustin managed to catch her off balance. Ustin was the most reserved *Fenpela* Sylva knew. His father was the next most reserved, and his mother had the heart beat of a Seawoods turtle and the patience to match. “By whom?”

“Arms Master Artrond.”

Silence. Sylva could have sworn there was a hint of distaste in the way Ustin said the name. The boy was full of surprises today.

“Arms Master Artrond goaded a fifteen-year-old boy?” Sylva asked. Ustin had already broken many assumptions she had about him over the years; that he would not be

as adept at *Aldfen* as other youth; that his quietness was due to shyness or a lack of thought; and now that he could not be goaded. She hoped he was not about to unwind her assumption that he was an honest boy as well. Artrond is an ass, Sylva thought, but a bully?

Ustin stood a little straighter and took the stance of one approaching an arms master with respect. “Yes, Arms Master Sylva.”

“Explain.” She kept her tone neutral.

“Arms Master Artrond has been trying to goad me for the past year. Especially when he has other students in the ring with him. Almost every morning on my way here, he calls out to me and asks why I think I’m too good to train with the other boys from my level of the city.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t changed routes to come up here.”

“I am not afraid of words, Arms Master Sylva.”

“Of course not,” Sylva placated. “I only meant that if you’ve been so determined not to be goaded, then why put yourself through all the name calling?”

“Arms Master Artrond runs the ring right outside my front door.”

Sylva nodded. “So he’s been goading you for years. What cracked your crab all of a sudden?”

Ustin must have gotten the gist, because he answered without asking what a crab was. He turned down his face before admitting. “He got more personal in his attacks.”

“I see.” Sylva could sense Ustin’s humiliation at losing his prized self control. Boys and girls taunted each other in the ring all the time, but Ustin had never been distracted. Not when Oren insulted trackers; not when Itzel threatened to crack his little sister in the

ring; nor when Aavid asked for his pants back from Ustin's mother's bedroom. Not even when Elsa offered to show him her breasts if he let her win. Sylva would have thought he went deaf during matches if he hadn't been so good at following instructions and suggestions while sparring. "So, what happened in the ring?"

"After he said ... what he said ... I walked toward the ring. It was the first time I'd given him a reaction, so he was grinning like a ... well, he had a big smile. That made me madder. I looked toward my house and saw my dad standing on the opposite side of the ring. He was watching the whole thing. I was just about to challenge Artrond, but the sight of my dad shamed me. Then he nodded at me, and I knew he approved." Ustin lifted his head again. "So I challenged Artrond to a dual of first touch and slapped him on the arm."

"You won?" Sylva hoped her surprise didn't hurt Ustin, but Artrond was an excellent fighter for all of his faults. "You slapped Arms Master Artrond on the arm?"

"My father witnessed the whole thing," Ustin blurted out.

"No, I believe you Ustin. I... I just wish I'd been there to see it. As your mentor."

"I'm sorry about that," Ustin said lowering his head. "But it's fine. You'll still be there for my first strike."

"Ustin, that was it. It's done."

"No." Ustin shook his head in earnest. "Arms Master Artrond said it didn't count as a first strike. He said it was a lucky shot and the result of a goading."

"What did your father say about that?"

"He didn't say anything." Ustin looked at a loss.

"Your father doesn't know that Artrond won't give you a first strike pin?"

“It never came up.”

“Ustin,” Sylva could feel herself losing patience. “Arms Master Artrond owes you one of his pins. That’s how it works. It doesn’t matter if it was a lucky shot, which I doubt it was. It doesn’t matter if he goaded you first. You hit an arms master in a fair bout. You have earned first strike.”

Ustin blinked. “Really?”

“Really.” Sylva knew that she would have to straighten Artrond out, but for now she wanted to let Ustin feel the pride that was his to feel. Sylva placed her feet shoulder width apart, held her sword blade down with both hands around the hilt and her back straight.

“Master Ustin. I salute you on your first strike.”

Ustin mimicked her posture and nodded solemnly. Then he broke out into a huge grin for the second time that morning. “Thank you, Arms Master Sylva.”

Sylva could see the joy beaming through every pore of the young man’s face. Even those clouded by red spots.

CHAPTER 2

THE PIN

“Arms Master Artrond, I challenge you to first touch with terms.” Sylva stood at the edge of the training area with the appropriate stance for an arms master hailing another master at his ring. She held the hilt of her practice sword in both hands with the blade up to announce the challenge.

Five boys’ heads swiveled like birds sensing a predator. They huddled around Artrond who had been explaining something to them when Sylva interrupted. Even as he looked at her, he appeared relaxed; but she saw him pump his fist while waving his students away with his other hand. “Mistress Sylva, approach.”

Sylva was not goaded by his disrespectful stance, nor did she care that he had called a married arms master by the title of a girl still training for first strike. She knew how Artrond felt about her. She was a foreigner who had married into the *Fenpela* with no traditions. And she had not married just anyone. Sylva’s husband Endegar was the future Grand Master of Kelkaam. Artrond belonged to a group of men known as the *Ongyofen*. They held the belief that the *Aldfen* was kept more sacred if the blood of all *Fenpela* was pure. They were a proud lot, and Artrond was prouder than any she had met. Artrond’s affiliation with the *Ongyofen* was why he only taught *Aldfen*—in order to keep the culture

as pure as the bloodlines. Sylva would play the part of one in perfect harmony with the *Aldfen*, even while Artrond stood casually at the center of the ring treating her like one beneath his notice instead of like a fellow arms master. When she stood at sword's reach from Artrond, he asked, "What terms?"

"If I win, you will give a first-strike pin to Ustin, son of Insek, which he rightfully earned yesterday."

Artrond's eyes narrowed. "He told you that, did he?"

"He told me that he hit your arm in a challenge match."

"It wasn't an official challenge, it was a goading. That's not part of *Aldfen*."

"Horse shit."

Artrond stood up straight and clutched his practice sword. "*Aldfen* is not horse shit..."

"I didn't say it was; your interpretation of it is. The laws of Kelkaam hold that a trainee who is able to achieve first touch in a match against an arms master is to receive a first-strike pin and report to the quartermaster that he or she is ready for posting as a messenger in the guard. The law says nothing of *Aldfen* as either a tradition or a school of training. There has never been any ceremony in the law for how the challenge is to be issued, why it is issued, or how it is to be fought. Traditions may be traditions, but law is law. You owe that young man a pin."

Artrond relaxed again, then spit to the side and leaned on his practice sword. "What are the terms if I win? Just the right to withhold my pin? Not much of a challenge."

"You may take the standard terms."

Artrond grinned at that. "You would challenge an arms master of a lower ring in order to gain a pin for that pimply little whelp?"

Sylva could see how easy it must have been for Ustin to ignore him for a year. “What on Kwel did you say to that boy to make him lose his cool, anyway?”

Artrond’s grin widened. “He didn’t tell you? Well, let’s set the terms straight first. If you win, your red-speckled little boy gets his pin. If I win, I get to trade you training shifts. You’ll come down here to fourth ring; I’ll move up to top ring. Have I got that right?”

Sylva nodded.

“Seems like first touch is a bit trite for a grudge match between seasoned arms masters. If you feel the need to defend the honor of your pencil-peckered little disciple, maybe we should change the terms to hand-to-hand.” Artrond looked Sylva up and down. “We could fight to an immobilization hold.”

“If you’re so desperate to get your hands on me without it counting as first touch, I’d be happy to change the terms to first killing strike instead.”

“Challenge accepted.” Artrond spun his practice sword into his hand and leapt forward. Sylva side stepped the wild charge and blocked his sword. The vibration made her fingers hurt. He had tried to push her back with his charge using the brute force tactics of *Aldfen*, but *Pektong* defenses allowed for avoidance, forcing an opponent to circle with you or get struck in the back. Sylva went for Artrond’s back, knowing he was a strict follower of *Aldfen*, but *Aldfen* had effective defenses against *Pektong* too. He spun fast enough to block her attack with a swing that could break a neck, even with a practice sword. Sylva realized that the first-killing-strike terms they had agreed to might be literal if she did not best Artrond fast. She attacked with a rapid succession of strikes.

Alternating between swings and stabs as often as possible, she tried to keep his defenses

changing and surprise him with a ferocity she hoped he would unbalance him. It worked for a moment, but Artrond recovered with good form. His defenses were standard *Aldfen*, so Sylva changed up between styles; a stab with one style led into a swing with the other leading to a stab with that one and a swing with the other. She had him moving backwards and on his guard, but then he planted his feet, blocked one of her strikes wide to his right and followed it with his left fist across her cheek. The impact knocked her two steps sideways, but she managed to keep her feet and block his sword swing as he brought the blade back the other way.

Sylva realized that Artrond cared less about winning than he cared about beating her. He had called it a grudge match, but she now realized how true that was for him. Whatever hatred he held for her, he would pound out of her flesh if she let him get that kind of opportunity again. She allowed Artrond to take the offensive while she backed away and circled around, giving herself some time to recover from the near-concussion he had given her. Then she felt her right eye narrowing as her cheek swelled. No time for games, she thought. She had to finish it.

Artrond went for a stab and Sylva used it as a chance to take back the offensive. She blocked it wide, much the same way Artrond had done to her, but she did not follow with her fist. She came back with a swing that Artrond easily blocked, but she had taken control. She backed him up as aggressively as she had the first time. He grinned, perhaps hoping for another chance to block and punch. Sylva hoped he would try it, but knew better than to assume Artrond was a one-trick opponent the way she had assumed Ustin might be that morning. Instead she hacked away at Artrond in one location the way a hot-head with little training might do. He blocked three times then made to kick her as

anyone might do to an opponent who insisted on attacking overhead for too long. But Sylva's attack was bait. As soon as she saw his weight shift to one leg, she changed her strike pattern and went for his knee. Her blade was faster than his kick. She brought all of her strength to bear; not out of malice, but a desire to end it. She had not intended to break his leg, but he flinched with his leg when he realized where she was headed. Her practice sword cracked him on the side of the knee, and he went down. The knee hit dirt. He caught himself with his empty hand, but still held his sword in a defensive position with the other. Sylva whacked the hand that gripped his sword, and the weapon dropped. She thrust her practice blade hard at his chest knocking him onto his back and eliciting a roar of pain as he was forced to reposition his bent leg.

“Killing strike accomplished,” Sylva said. She stood up straight, held her sword in the position of respect and nodded to Artrond. “I’ll have your pin now.”

Artrond reached into the vest of his training padding and flicked a metal token at Sylva. “You really are just what I told the boy.”

Sylva caught the pin and looked back at Artrond without a word.

“A cold, foreign bitch with her arse out for the humping of a prince.”

Sylva's breath caught in her throat. She expected that kind of insult from Artrond.

What she had not expected was Ustin to challenge the man on her behalf.

CHAPTER 3

A NIGHT AT HOME

The hearth room next door still held faint orange shadows. Sylva could hear the sporadic pops from the last of the evening's wood as it burned down to coals. Kwon, the family hound, lay at her feet. She could feel the weave of the rug under her feet and the heat of Kwon's hindquarter butting up against her ankle. Once in a while he would flop his long tail against the woven rug that covered the stone floor. Other than that and the quiet crackle from the other room, the house was quiet. The plaster walls of her own room glowed yellow with candle light then faded into darkness further away from her vanity where she sat inspecting her swollen eye in the mirror. Her fight with Artrond had left her with a goose egg on her cheek bone and a blackened eye. But it had not broken anything nor left her with any permanent damage, for which she was grateful. The two scars on her face and one on her neck were bad enough. Thanks to training in the sun for hours and hours a day, her skin had begun to age ahead of its time. She had been fair as a child; her mother insisted she stay indoors as much as possible. And while she had made it out of the house more often than her mother would have liked, it was typically into the seawoods, where she could swim between trees without much exposure to the sky. Since deciding to train with Endegar at a young age, she had spent most of her time in outdoor

practice rings going through the positions of the *Pektong* or *Aldfen*, memorizing the moves of the different hand fighting schools, sparring with any willing partner, or watching the more experienced fighters spar with each other. Now she had skin like tanned leather and three white scars to remind her of the lifestyle she had chosen. Those in addition to the tightened muscles that flattened out her feminine features in a way that would have mortified her mother.

The mirror in front of her reflected some of the candle light back into the room, but she could barely see the small lump in her bed that was Eljin. She had let her son fall asleep in her room hours ago, but Sylva's exhaustion was slower to come as she got older. Not that she was old, but she didn't simply lie down and fall asleep as Eljin did—as she had at Eljin's age—before the cares of adulthood, parenthood, war, and leadership had left her callused, stretched, and scarred with the subtlest beginnings of folds under her eyes. Endegar laughed when she pointed these things out. When she insisted he acknowledge the slow decay of her body, he balked. If she kept on too long, he would either growl or retreat into a book. She wondered how much longer it would be before the larger lump of her husband would fill the space in which Eljin curled up. She missed Endegar's laughs, eye rolls, and even his growls. She wondered if he missed her, or if he was grateful for the time away working at the prophet's behest.

The stained, wooden trim and matching dressers darkened in the flickering shadows. In front of her dresser hung a blue dress Endegar had bought for her the day he announced he had to leave again. She thought it funny that after all these years, a dress was still his parting gift. Like most of the women who chose to remain warriors throughout adulthood, Sylva avoided dresses. Not because she thought she would lose

respect as a warrior, but because she did not fit in them the way other ladies did with their curves and unmarred skin. Most women warriors married warrior men who understood their wife's profession and thus their bodies, or so they told themselves. Endegar had bought her dresses on multiple occasions. Sylva refused to wear each in turn, and she would not wear this newest one. She wondered why her husband continued to buy them. Perhaps he thought she would enjoy wearing them alone in the house, when there was no one home to see her. She could cover the mirror and play at femininity as if she was unaware of her muscular upper arms and sinewy forearms every time she looked down. No, the dresses only made her wonder if Endegar secretly wished she had chosen an alternate to the warrior life. Perhaps when he married her he had thought she would give it up like Insek's wife, Ameera. Ameera had won a golden staff for her service to the grand master before leaving the ranks to raise Ustin and his little sister. Was Sylva selfish for not doing the same? She too had earned the golden staff long before her own son was born. Was she neglecting both her husband and her son of the woman she ought to be? Her mother would have thought so. But her mother would have disdained of her training in the sword at all, much less running off to another continent to live with a foreign people in a hidden land and taking on all of their customs. Had Sylva never been separated from her family all those years ago, she would not have known such things were possible for her.

She leaned in close to the mirror and got lost in the transition of red to purple to black that embellished the side of her eye. Kwon bolted up onto his front paws and barked into the darkness away from the hearth. Startled as she was, Sylva's arms bumped the candelabras on either side of her, nearly knocking them both to the floor.

“Hush, Kwon,” she said, tapping his hind quarter with her foot. The dog rose up on all fours and padded across the hearth room and into Eljin’s abandoned room where the beast normally slept at the foot of the boy’s bed. When he barked again, Sylva stood up. She was about to go swat him when she heard his body drop on the floor. Odd, she thought, to bark before curling up for bed. The fire in the hearth room was low now. The room held naught but shadows and heat. Even Kwon is off to bed, she thought, perhaps I should be too. When her eyes adjusted to the darkness beyond the light of the coals, she saw one shadow that did not belong. The shape of a cloaked person—closer to her size than most adult *Fenpelas*—stood in Eljin’s doorway facing her from across the hearth room. An outsider in an outsider’s home, and he had been hiding in her son’s room.

She lunged for her sword next to the bed. She could hear the stranger running across the hearth room and drew her blade even as she turned back toward the door. The stranger’s black garb was lightened by candle now. The intruder looked from her to Eljin. He held a foreign blade with a single sharpened side and a subtle curve. Sylva noticed the blood on the blade. Now she understood the cause for Kwon’s barking and the cause for his sudden desist. The man looked at the bed with Eljin in it and then back at her.

“Eljin!” She yelled without taking her eyes off of the intruder.

“Mama?” Eljin called tiredly from behind her. The sheets rustled and in a startled voice he added, “Who’s that?”

“Stand by the bed,” she answered without looking at the boy. She could hear him scooting to the far side of the bed away from both her and the man in the doorway. “No Eljin, behind me!”

The man saw the same opportunity she had wanted to prevent. He darted toward Eljin leaving Sylva with limited maneuverability between the bed and the dresser and on the opposite side of the room from her son. She thrust at the assassin's side as he passed her, but he blocked it even as he made his way between the bed and the vanity. Eljin jumped back up on the bed and ran toward her screaming. Leaning over the foot board, the cloaked figure reached with his sword toward the boy. Sylva knocked it down to the bed, but now everyone was stuck. Eljin was trapped behind his mother; the assassin was leaning awkwardly across the bed with his blade on the sheets; and Sylva could not move without letting the man's blade free.

"Eljin," she whispered. She dared not look back at him. "I need you to do exactly what I say when I say it."

"Yes, mama."

The man started pulling his sword back between the bed and her blade. Sylva raised her blade and started toward the door. "Follow me closely, Eljin."

The boy was as close as a shadow, but they only made it a step. The man moved back toward them around the foot of the bed. Sylva thrust to keep him where he was. The space between the bed and the vanity was almost as awkward for him as her own position was for her. It was slow progress getting out. Sylva made a thrust and side step. Then the man moved toward them. Another thrust kept him back. Another side step made him determined to advance before they could get out of their corner. As soon as Sylva was out from beside the bed, the man charged her. He was fast, but Sylva knocked his blade wide forcing him to step back again. She stepped toward him, leaving enough room for Eljin to escape behind her.

“Eljin, to your room, now!”

The man thrust and Sylva went to block, but it was a feint. His next strike came fast. She had to step back, almost blocking Eljin’s way again, but the boy made it passed. She could hear small bare feet on stone as he ran to obey her. Her opponent struck again and she was forced into the doorway.

“Kwon!” Eljin yelled from his room.

Not wanting to have her arms pinned by the threshold, Sylva backed into the hearth room. “Not now, son! Get to your grandfather!”

The man picked up a candelabra as he passed the vanity and threw it at Sylva to force her back from the door and allow him to also clear the threshold. He followed her into the hearth room as she moved back. Sylva held the center between her room and Eljin’s. The man attacked her on the side allowing him to step toward the hearth as he moved forward. She rotated her body, parrying the assassin’s blade as he stepped around her. But when he had made it a third the way around, she went into a wild offensive of *Aldfen*. The fighting style threw most outsiders off balance the first time they encountered it, and the assassin was no exception. He had moved far enough around Sylva that he could not retreat to her bedroom, but he could not get the rest of the way around her either. He was forced toward the hearth.

Now the assassin was cornered between the two large chairs in which she and Endegar spent their evenings together. The wall to one side held a painting of Kelkaam as seen from the cliffs to the north. On the other wall was a portrait of Eljin with his grandfather. Who would have thought that great bull of a man would take such a liking to a child. One side table held a thick book with a placeholder in it. Above the hearth sat a

ceremonial short sword Sylva had found in a field of kelp near her homeland. Though it had lain there for centuries, or longer, it still shone bright in whatever light it touched.

“Eljin! Hurry!”

“I’m there!” A loud thump of stone on stone sounded from Eljin’s room. Sylva went into a strictly defensive pattern with her sword now that she knew Eljin was safe. She stepped back a little, hoping that the center of the room would give her more space to swing, but the shadow never gave her an opportunity. He lunged and she riposted again. He kicked she stepped back. He swung and she blocked. It was beginning to feel like a stalemate. She wanted to disengage—to get enough distance that she could turn and run. This fight was now meaningless. The assassin had lost his victim. Sylva knew if she could reach the front door, the man would never leave the pillar alive. How he had gotten up here in the first place was a question that could wait. To force her to engage, the man reached farther than he should. She was able to braise his arm. He recoiled, and she took a full step toward the doorway leading into the entry hall. Instead of jumping back into the fray, the shadow also stepped back. With his left hand he took the ceremonial short sword down from the wall above the fireplace. Sylva took the opportunity to back up into hall, then she turned and ran to the front door. She unbarred it just as the shadow appeared in the doorway behind her. With no time to unlock the outside door, Sylva took the offensive first. She no longer had to worry about Eljin. It was her fight mentally now as well as physically. She thrust at the shadow before he had a chance to fully enter the room. Thrust, swing, parry, riposte. She kept him on the defensive until he stood in the doorway to the hearth room. The shadow was now encumbered by the extra weapon in his left hand. It was no good to block with in the threshold between rooms, so instead it

kept him off balance. She pressed her advantage while she could. Before the shadow backed fully into the hearth room where it would have enough space to use both swords, she relented and stepped back. The shadow paused, seeming to weigh his options for a split second before taking the offensive and forcing Sylva back into the entryway. She parried and riposted well enough that he remained hampered by the door jamb behind both elbows. She was in control of this fight now. She had him pinned. He could move back into the hearth room allowing her to retreat, or he could continue fighting from an untenable position. She decided she would allow him to push her just one step back into the entry way where she would have a clean swing at him. As soon as the cloaked figure stepped toward her she moved to swing, but the shadow kicked her in the stomach knocking her further back into the room than she had intended to go. The shadow came in after her and now had full advantage of two weapons. She swung at him from his left, hoping to keep him off balance with the short sword, but he was more skilled than that. He was able to block with one and riposte with the other as if the two weapons were a matched set. She was working double time now just to block and was barely able to strike back. She side stepped hoping that superior foot work would balance out the competition, but the shadow seemed better trained at combat than assassination and kept up with her. Soon it was Sylva whose back was near the threshold to the hearth room—an untenable position. Once her back was fully to the doorway, she darted backward into the hearth room. The assassin followed with his long sword extended toward her, hoping to force entry with a piercing move. Sylva saw her opportunity to disarm him. She swung at the overextended weapon, but halfway through her swing she realized her mistake. As the

assassin's long sword went clattering to the floor, the ceremonial blade the assassin had taken from her own wall now came up toward her open side.

Sylva did not feel herself fall. She could see her body lying on the ground beneath her. The figure in black picked up his blade, hurried to her bed room to retrieve the remaining candelabrum, and rushed into Eljin's room. Sylva knew the boy would be in the fortress by now, telling his grandfather what he had seen.

Again she looked down at her body on the floor. Blood had come out of her mouth and dripped into her hair. When she looked at where she felt she was in comparison, there was nothing to see—just the feeling of a self. She was dead; so why was she still here? She tried to move away from her body but found herself stuck in place. She seemed able to “look around” but not change positions. Her mother was half a world away and likely thought Sylva long dead. Now the woman would be right. Then Sylva felt herself being pulled back toward her body. It was not a physical pull; she was no longer corporeal. But the floating point from which her vision and sense of self was centered drifted down and she had no way of stopping it. Was she not really dead? The prospect seemed unlikely the way the blade was buried from hilt to heart in her side, but down she went until all turned black. Then she felt herself fall.

CHAPTER 4

OLD HAT, NEW HEAD

Devika opened eyes and sat up on the ground of a hearth room with the taste of blood filling the mouth. She put the arms back and rested the hands on a cold stone floor. Something strange had happened. She should be on the altar in the woods. It had been midday when they had started the ceremony. Now it was night. She had never liked awakening in someone else's sweat, even if it was her sweat now. It had not been her sweat when released from the body. That sort of thing is why she had insisted all of her sacrifices be bathed—washed and scented—before she took their bodies. But this was not the body in which she should have awakened. This woman seemed to have been murdered. She touched the moisture she could feel running from the side of her mouth. Blood, she realized when she looked at the hands. The taste made her want to spit, but she dared not make a noise yet. Two blades rested next to her: an abnormally long sword the woman must have been fighting with, and the weapon that had pierced the body. At least the woman had not soiled herself in death. That was something. She wanted to inspect this new body, but knew there was a man around the corner. She heard something wooden tip over and crash onto stone. The man was tossing the room next door.

Wiping the blood from the hand onto the night shirt, she stood quietly and grabbed the longer of the two blades on the floor. She had never seen a weapon like the long sword she now held in both hands. The blade was not copper or bronze, and it was twice as long as anything she had ever fought with. She wondered how to position herself. As soon as the man looked outside the room, he would see the body was gone. He might come charging out; he might become still and cautious; he might jump out a window worrying more about self preservation. Did he even know what he had done? She decided to peek into the room while he still rummaged.

As she moved toward the door, she noticed her feet were callused; she could feel it against the cold, stone floor. This woman had worked too much. Her muscles were overgrown. A warrior, no doubt, as evidenced by the sword. The ceremonial blade left behind on the floor was closer to what she herself considered normal, but she could not go around killing people with that. She also noticed her right cheek felt tight. A dog lay beheaded between her and the cloaked man. He was kneeling by the far wall inspecting the area that had been covered by the bed. The bed was now tipped up against a window and a tall wooden chest had been knocked over. Her first view of the outside did not help her establish where she was. She thought about sneaking up behind the man and questioning him through torture. But there were too many questions, and assassins were unlikely to answer. Besides, she did not want to fight an accomplished opponent when she herself was new to the full range of motion this body may or may not be capable of. I need to leave here anyway, she thought. She made it most of the way across the room before the hooded man turned to face her. He only got one foot under him and his sword

partway out of its sheath before she ran him through. The sword was well balanced even if it was too big. The new body's overgrown muscles made it easy to cut a man down.

The freshly made corpse leaned against the wall in an awkward sitting position. Noticing the man's blade, she put the sword she held down on the floor. She pulled the dead man's sword free of his hand and its sheath. The sword was slightly curved like the one Jaya had given her so long ago. This made her curious. She pushed the man's head down and pulled the cowl back to verify her suspicions. Indeed, the eye-tattoo of the *gwelamin* looked back at her from behind the assassin's neck. Why had Jaya wanted this woman dead? She took the man's belt off, though it took her a moment to figure out the metal latch holding it together. She replaced the sword in the scabbard and wore the belt herself, again fumbling with the contraption meant to keep the belt taut around her waist. When she tipped the bed back down, it rested unevenly with the dead man's shoulders propping up one corner. She opened the window after taking a moment to figure out the latch. The night was cool, but comfortable. The days were likely pleasant wherever she was. The air smelled slightly tropical but was devoid of salt water. Not on the ocean. She could see a great stone wall running from the bottom of the house and away from the window. She leaned out of the window and could just make out a colossal staircase running down from the front of the house. It was as if the home were built on a city wall. She closed the window and looked around the room. The bed was small and a handful of toys lay strewn about. A child's room, she realized—stranger still.

She picked up the ingenious lantern. Three flames atop strings in wax. Brilliant. Back in the hearth room she left the long sword next to the ceremonial blade. Then she lit all of the wax lamps on the fireplace with the one she held. The room was finely built if small

for a proper hearth. Even in the dim light she could tell the masonry of the structure was exquisite with its straight, thin lines of mortar between evenly cut and shaped, smooth, gray stones. The strange furniture seemed finely crafted with fabric attached directly to the frame like built in cushions. The painting on the wall of a man and a boy startled her at first. It was more life-like than any artwork she had ever seen. The painting on the other wall was of a strange landscape. The focus of the painting was an enormous stone structure with thin brush strokes denoting a road that seemed to wind like a spiral around the pillar from a jungle floor to a city on top. The lettering at the bottom read “Kelkaam,” meaning “city on a hill.” An appropriate title to the strange image. She wondered why someone had painted a nonexistent place.

With the set of wax lanterns leading her way she entered the doorway directly across the hearth room from the child’s room. Another set of lights lay broken on the floor just outside. She assumed this would be the mother’s quarters. She lit every candle in this larger bedroom and looked around. On either side of a much bigger bed stood a wooden frame made to hold a person’s armor. One was empty. The other held armor that was foreign to her. Like the swords she had held that night, the metal was a silver color instead of copper or bronze. The breast plate clearly belonged to a woman. Mine, she thought. Warrior parents, and the father was out on campaign. Where was the child? She had never seen metal armor for arms and legs before. No imperial style from the seven continents used thigh plates, and never had she seen a long shirt made of chains. Where was she? An island no doubt, but one big enough that she could not smell the sea. The strange armor was well decorated like that of a commanding officer. On the floor next to the armor sat a pack with a bedroll tied to it. Doubtless it included all the accoutrements

of a foot soldier ready for deployment. The lack of a saddle surprised her. Certainly a woman of rank did not walk with the footmen.

She wanted nothing more than to explore this room, but first she had to make sure she was alone. Certainly the ruckus the assassin and lady of the house had made fighting would have attracted any other inhabitants by now, but she had to be sure. Before leaving, a great mirror above a small table called to her to look at this new body, but she resisted for now. Carrying the set of wax and flames, she walked through the threshold leading from the family quarters and into an entryway. A torch stood at the ready by the front door of the house, and she lit it with the flames she held. She replaced the bar behind the door. Taking the torch for extra light, she opened the only other inside door with her foot and found a simple dining area next to a kitchen. She wondered when she would be hungry, but set that thought aside for now. This seemed to be the end of the residence. Six rooms including the entryway. It felt ridiculously small for such a high-standing officer. Where were the servants' quarters? Perhaps this was temporary housing for a commander overseeing the fortifications. After all the house stood on a wall.

Another torch stood near the oven in the kitchen. She set the wax lanterns down on the counter so she could place the extra torch between her arm and her body. Recovering the lights, she went back to the parents' bedroom.

An empty torch holder was mounted to the wall just inside the bedroom door. She placed the lit torch there and dropped the unused torch next to the armor before looking through the travel pack. A full set of clothing rested at the bottom. She was surprised by this, but perhaps it was another sign of the woman's rank. She determined she should leave this set of clothes in the pack, which she intended to take with her, and find a

matching set of clothes to wear now. She could not very well go wandering around in this woman's nightclothes with a large, bloody gash on one side. The furnishings around the room were foreign to her. But wherever she was, drawers were drawers and doors were doors. She opened them all. Men's clothing filled the drawers on the side of the bed with the absent armor. Women's clothing filled everything else. She wanted to wear the blue dress that hung on the front of an armoire, but it was not practical for travel. Several more pristine dresses hung inside, but eventually she found an outfit matching that of the travel pack and laid it on the bed. Now she could get to work on seeing this new body of hers.

A bowl and a metal pitcher sat on a table at the foot of the bed. She washed her face as well as the blood out of her mouth and hair. Then she turned back to the table with the large mirror mounted on the wall behind. Soldier or no, this woman liked to look at herself. What woman does not, she considered. She gathered up all of the wax sticks in all of the rooms, placed them on either side of the mirror, and lit them. She could feel the heat of the many mini lanterns so close together, but wanted as much light as she could get. Never had she sat in front of a mirror that reflected so clearly and was surprised to find it was glass. She took a good look at the body she inhabited. Her right cheek was darkened from a blow to the face and a bit puffy around the eye. Not puffy enough to be from the fight that had killed the woman, though. This woman had been in a fight earlier that day as well. Such a ruffian, Devika thought. But the left side of her face revealed wonderful bone structure, though the soldier's musculature accentuated it in a brutish manner. Loose, sandy curls framed a strong face. This hair cannot decide if it is brown or blond, she thought, but the blue eyes made her exotic. The two scars that marred her face were made more pronounced by the fact that her otherwise flawless skin had been tanned

by the sun like a slave's. The one on her neck was even nastier. This woman had been a beauty in her youth. What on Kwel is she doing in the army, she wondered. She picked up the woman's brush and began to untangle the knots in her hair. The myriad flames began to make her hot, but she needed the light to see herself properly. She scooted the chair back from the table while she finished brushing her hair. After several minutes her hair gleamed in the light of dozens of wax lanterns and a torch. Not the best light for beauty enhancement, but it would have to do.

She took off her sweaty, torn, blood-stained night shirt and gasped. Stretch marks *and* battle scars. It was some kind of cruel joke. Still, this body had potential. If she let the muscles soften and cut the hair down to health, a quick death would fix the rest. The area around her eyes told a more damning story, though. Early thirties. She had not been this old in years. The irony of that made her smile. Oh, my, she thought, this face has a beautiful smile. But the body was worn. It would make for a pleasing temporary condition, but she would have to sacrifice it for another. She looked at the back of her hands to confirm the age and gasped again. "Very clean for a soldier's hands," she murmured. "Impressive."

She decided she had dallied long enough and began to dress in the field clothes of the soldier. Once dressed, she looked out the window of the master bedroom to see how much different the view was from this side of the house. Quite different, she found. There was no sign of the ground. Any ground. The moon was over half full, but when she looked down, she saw the bottom of the house sitting on the city wall, sitting on what looked like the face of a cliff. Beyond that she could see nothing. No lights of a city

below nor camp fires nor anything. Darkness. She thought about the painting in the hearth room and wondered if she could really be in such a place.

A knock at the front door startled her half way out of the window. She caught herself and then her breath.

“Field Marshall Sylva!” Came a voice and then three more knocks. “Are you in there?”

She ran to the entry way and checked the bar at the door. It was firmly in place. The knocking paused, and she heard voices.

“Send men up onto the wall with a long ladder. We should be able to break in through the boy’s window that way.”

She had not been cautious enough. Kuruk had always said her vanity would be the death of her. She smiled at that. It had been over fifty deaths of her. But this one would be forced upon her. She had to find a way out. Back in the bedroom she noticed the belt and sheath that went with the long sword. She buckled it on and sheathed the sword that lay on the ground. The ceremonial blade she wrapped in a blue dress that hung from the woman’s dresser and stuffed it into the footman’s pack in the bedroom. She looked at the open window. How far down was it? Far enough that they would not catch up to her? She took the helmet off the top of the armor and dropped it out the window. She listened for a count of ten but heard nothing. Then she took the torch from the holder by the door and threw it out. She watched the flame shrink for a count of twenty before it sparked on contact with something far below and suddenly vanished. Amazing, she thought. It should be quite safe, quick, and painless to kill herself this way. In an hour she would wake up

free of these awful markings on the body she had taken. Surely it will take them hours to find where I have landed, by which time I will be gone.

The banging on the door was a loud constant booming now. They had brought some kind of ram to bear. There was no time to put on armor, much less this foreign style. The pack would have to do. She was glad it included a change of clothes. What she had just changed into would be worthless when next she woke. She shoved the socks and boots that sat next to the bed into the pack and lifted it onto her shoulders. She used a sash belonging to "Field Marshal Sylva" to tie the hilt of the sword to its scabbard so that it would not come loose in the fall. With another sash she tied the pack to her chest and hoped it would hold. She had no idea how far she was about to drop.

CHAPTER 5

ENLISTMENT

Ustin slept through the banging on the door. He slept through the conversation Grand Master Elias had with his father, Insek. He slept through the rare exclamation Insek had made. But when his father stated his name simply and quietly from the door of his room, he sat bolt upright. “Yes, sir.”

Insek stood motionless on the threshold. The only movement Ustin could detect was a black waver along the chin of his father’s silhouette as the man told him, “The grand master would like a word.”

Ustin slid out of bed and padded across the rug onto the stone floor of the entryway before he understood the words his father had spoken. When he found himself standing in his bedclothes with a wild shock of untied hair before the Grand Master of Kelkaam, he pieced the words together. To his astonishment, the grand master looked as bad as Ustin. The man wore the leggings of his bedclothes with boots, his green vest designating him as grand master with no shirt beneath, and his salt-streaked hair had been tied in a hurry. The difference was in the way Grand Master Elias presented himself; he was average height for a *Fenpela*, but he stood as though he were as tall as the misshapen pillar they lived on. His broad chest reminded Ustin of a bull, but the gray hairs that ran up his arms

all the way to the tops of his shoulders made Ustin think of a wolf. He had only seen these animals in the tracker's notebook his father kept. There were no wolves or bulls in the fen, but the temperate land above the northern cliffs had foreign animals that only those who left the surrounding jungle could describe: trackers, exiles, and the prince. Ustin wondered if the grand master had spent as much time outside the fen when he was a prince as his son does now. He also wondered where this man got his posture and pride. Was the ruling family simply born with a different type of spine? Ustin considered himself to be very brave and strong—out of confidence and not arrogance, or so he hoped. But the grand master towered over Ustin even though their eyes were similar heights. He imagined this man had never been intimidated by anyone in his life. Ustin glanced at his father and mimicked Insek's stance: tall, strong, and reserved. He could not imagine why the grand master would visit him in the middle of the night dressed in a combination of authoritative and bedtime clothing. "Your father tells me you won your pin today."

Ustin was relieved by the warmth in the man's voice. "Yes, sir."

"Ustin, son of Insek, as Grand Master of Kelkaam I commission you to the messenger corps of the guard." There was less formality in the declaration than Ustin had expected. The grand master proffered eleven parchments folded in unequal thirds and sealed with wax. "This message needs to be delivered to every checkpoint along the spiral road and then to the boat docks."

"Yes, sir." Ustin took them and headed out the front door. He was amazed at the number of torches burning throughout the cavern. Every square inch of the place was lit.

"Ustin," Insek called in his soft voice.

“Yes, sir,” Ustin spun in place to face his father.

“You should dress in the messenger outfit you got from Quartermaster Obil yesterday.”

Ustin realized he was still in his bedclothes and strode back to the house with his head down. The grand master grinned at him. His father patted him lightly on the shoulder as he passed. Insek was so subtle that his family experienced the man’s emotions like a deaf and blind person experiences the weather. There was no darkening sky or distant sound of thunder. Nor was there a bright sun, much less rainbows to signal the changing moods. There was only warmth or chill; the weight of winter rain pouring down; the smell of spring blossoms; or the heat of pride that gave lift to a bird’s flight. The thunder, rare as it was, vibrated through the hearts of those around him. When Ustin walked passed his father in shame, the man’s touch on the boy’s shoulder was like a comfortable breeze that whispered approval across his hot skin. On the way to his room, Ustin heard the grand master tell his father what a good man Ustin had become. He heard his father reply, “He is the best of men.”

Ustin felt the heat of pride burning his ears. He tried to squelch it as he dressed in his fine new uniform of brown, leather armor with the glowing staff of the prophet tooled into the breast. He strapped the belt that held a stock knife from the quartermaster, a large pouch to carry messages, and the sword his father had given him. The sword was much nicer than the stock swords. The sheathe was black leather with silver trim, including a peregrine-head sigil on the locket. The sword itself had the same peregrine-head on the pommel, black leather wrapping on the hilt, and cross-guards forged like open wings. The flat of the blade had patterned etchings from a foreign land. Ustin had no idea where his

father had gotten it. It was the sword of a tracker or soldier, not a messenger. But Insek told his son he had been saving it for him. Today Ustin had been scorched by his father's kindness. He returned to the entryway of his home. The room was empty. Grand Master Elias and his father were gone. He stood for a moment wondering what to do. He looked at the messages in his hand, placed them in the pouch at his waist, and opened the front door to leave.

“Ustin.”

Insek, quiet as ever, had stepped into the front entryway dressed in his tracker's leathers and wearing the crimson cloak that branded him a prince's man. A gold scimitar pin held the cloak closed. The pin was a gift from Prince Endegar to any red cloak who had killed for him. Ustin did not know the story behind the pin. His father was happy to show Ustin and his little sister the new plants and animals he had added to his tracker's notebook, but Insek never talked about his military encounters. “You'll learn soon enough,” was all he ever said when Ustin asked about the pin or a new scar or a cut down Insek's thigh deep enough that his father had stayed home for seven weeks instead of the usual one. Insek held a green cloak over his arm. Ustin asked why he was dressed.

“There is work to do for the trackers.”

“But it's your week off.”

“Field Marshal Sylva has gone missing.”

“Arms Master Sylva?”

Insek nodded. “There was an assassination attempt on either her or her son or the both of them. Field Marshal Sylva helped young Prince Eljin escape while fighting a black-cloaked intruder. The boy ran straight to his grandfather. When the grand master's men

arrived, the house was locked, the doors barred, but the only one left inside was a dead assassin. The field marshal was gone amidst a strange scene pointing to stranger circumstances, which I don't have time to describe. You must carry out your duty, and I must carry out mine." Insek handed the green cloak to Ustin. "The grand master asked that you wear this as his personal messenger. Good luck, my son."

With that, Insek strode out of the house, leaving the door open behind him. Ustin clasped the green cloak together with an iron seal of Kelkaam. His long day was getting longer. His arms master had saluted him for earning first strike. Then she had broken the leg of the man who had refused to give Ustin his first strike pin. After hand delivering the pin to Ustin's home, Arms Master Sylva had given him a hug which he had wanted to return but wasn't sure how. After she left, his father had given him a blade worthy of a master swordsman. His mother had made his favorite meal of garlic fowl over rice with fruit and figs on the side. His little sister, Aavə, had doted on him all evening asking over and over to see his first strike pin, lauding Ustin as the next master tracker after Father, and talking all about how she could not wait to start training with Arms Master Sylva when she turned eight next season. His arms master's disappearance was a strange ending to an otherwise perfect day.

Ustin knew he did not have time to digest the news of his mentor, so he closed the door to the home of his childhood and ran. He was a messenger in the guard now, and it was a messenger's duty to run. He ran down the middle road, a screw-shaped path drilled through the center of the stone pillar that led from the top of Kelkaam to the eighth and lowest level of the upper city. On the lowest level he ran to the edge of the pillar where three bored soldiers guarded the gate at the top of the spiral road. A man leaned against

the stone frame of the gate, a woman looked over the ledge of the road onto the black jungle far below, and another man stood on top of the gate to watch for any who might approach. His crossbow sat uncocked on the wall next to him. Ustin understood their boredom. Gate duty was the least desirable. No one had attacked Kelkaam directly in over forty years, and even then they had not made it passed the first gate above the jungle floor. Still, the grand master insisted that the ten gates be attended day and night all year round. When Ustin approached, the guard leaning against the stone frame stood up and gripped the hilt of his sword. He had the two stripes of a corporal pinned to his green cloak. All three of them were only a little older than Ustin.

“I bring a message from the grand master himself,” Ustin announced and handed the corporal one of the sealed documents which the man opened and read by torch light. The guardswoman overlooking the jungle turned to stare at Ustin instead. The man on the gate glanced down and then back at the road below. They all wore the green cloak of the grand master which they had earned by fulfilling their role as messengers and being promoted to full guard. Ustin wore a similar cloak on his first night out after earning his pin, but he did not know what he had done to earn it.

As soon as the corporal finished the letter, he commanded, “Open the gate for the grand master’s messenger here.”

As Ustin slipped through he heard the corporal tell the other two guards, “Listen up, now...” Ustin ran down the cliff road that spiraled around the outside of the great pillar of stone. His ancestors had built it over the course of the last millennium as the floor of the fen sunk almost the height of a man each year. Every century or so a new checkpoint had been created. It was past due for another one, but Grand Master Elias refused. He claimed

it would be a waste of time. That upset the *Ongyofen* who believed everything should be done as it had been in the past.

After a little while Ustin saw the glow of torchlight at the back of the next gate. As he came upon the guards from uphill they spun around and drew swords. One of them called out, "Hold. Who goes there?" Ustin slowed to a walk but continued to approach the men. Nine gates above the jungle floor, these soldiers were considerably more serious about their duty than the last gate crew.

"Ustin, son of Insek." Ustin held out one of the identical letters to the corporal." I carry a message from the grand master himself."

The corporal sheathed his sword before taking the note and reading. The man overlooking the jungle kept his sword out and glared at Ustin. Ustin had heard that some guardsmen liked to intimidate the messengers, but this man was about as intimidating as a small dog. From the man's age, Ustin figured that he had been promoted out of the messenger ranks recently. Ustin paid him no mind. He found the practice of intimidation trite and tiresome. But the man refused to be ignored. He moved his sword slowly toward Ustin's hip and fanned out the green cloak. "I didn't get one of these until I was on the guard. Why does a messenger fresh out of training get one? You filch this out of the quartermaster's storehouse?"

Ustin remained quiet. He gave the man a bored look, keeping his eyelids and facial muscles relaxed. Then he looked back at the corporal, who was still reading. The guardsman pulled back Ustin's cloak further until he could see the sword that rested on Ustin's hip. "That doesn't look like stock equipment either, boy."

The guard stepped forward and reached for the hilt of Ustin's weapon. Ustin put his fighting hand calmly on the hilt of his sword. He thought about the grand master's posture—the direct look in the man's eyes when he spoke. He thought about the command that the grand master had in the simple way he held himself. Ustin stood to his full height and glared at the man. The guard paused, but he would not be cowed by a messenger. "Let me see that sword, boy."

The woman on top of the gate was now sitting on the ledge with a grin watching her fellow guardsman harass the messenger. Ustin paused to think of all of the quips he could make, the responses the guardsman would make back, and his retorts to those. All of the witty options resulted in his mind with inanity, so Ustin responded with a simple, "No."

"Well now, that's not very polite," the guardsman stepped forward again so that his chest bumped against Ustin's arm. The man still had his sword out behind Ustin and now grabbed at Ustin's hilt with his empty hand. "Let's see that sword, boy."

Ustin looked at the corporal who had finished reading the message and now stood there watching his guardsman jostle the young messenger. The woman on top of the gate grinned wider as her fellow guard tried to pry Ustin's fingers from the hilt of his sword. Ustin stood as steady as he could. The corporal raised his eyebrows as if to ask what the messenger was going to do about it. Ustin thought about the young prince running from his home while his mother fought off an attacker. He thought of his arms master missing, possibly dead. Why was the corporal just standing there? He had read the letter. He knew there was no time for this. Seeing that help was not forthcoming, Ustin decided to act. The guard was a little bigger than Ustin and had two or three more years of training. Ustin knew he would get only one chance to surprise him, so he planned it out in his head

before he made a move. When ready, he grabbed the man's left wrist with his own free left hand and yanked the man's arm, forcing the guard to turn slightly away. His back was partly to Ustin now. Ustin placed his other hand on the man's shoulder to force him around further. Then yanked the man's arm back while pulling his shoulders down. The guard bent over backward trying to keep his arm from breaking. Ustin kicked behind the man's legs, and the man fell onto his back. Once the guard was down, Ustin pulled the man's left arm across his chest, stepped on the man's sword hand, drew his belt knife, and held it to the man's throat. "I said 'no.'"

The woman on top of the gate went giddy with laughter. The sound reminded Ustin of his little sister. The guard on the ground sneered. Ustin stayed in position, not daring to let the man go for fear of reprisal. After a few moments the corporal said, "Stand down. Both of you. Guard, open the gate for the master tracker's son."

The woman, still smiling, unlatched the gate from her perch above. Ustin stood up but kept his belt knife out until the guard he had bested sheathed his sword and leaned back against the half-wall separating the cliff road from a long drop into the jungle far below. The corporal still gave no sign of approval or dismay, but he knew Ustin. At least he knew that Ustin's father, Insek, was the master tracker. Is that why the grand master had given him a green cloak? Not likely. Kelkaam society ran on merit, with the exception of the grand master who was born a prince. So what had Ustin done to deserve such an honor? Perhaps the grand master was his *dodomen*—the gift-giver who had left something for him every year on his birthday starting at age eight. A *dodomen* could be anyone in Kelkaam who saw potential in a child and wanted to encourage them throughout their training. Most gift-givers remained anonymous, even to the child's

parents. Many remained anonymous forever. Ustin had asked his mother and father each time a gift appeared if they knew who his *dodomen* was, but they always denied any knowledge. Not that he would know if they were lying; they were both too subtle to have their secrets known by a child. His sixteenth birthday was not for another two weeks yet, and he wondered if he would receive a final gift. The sixteenth birthday present was often something meant to help with the new man or woman's service in the guard. But Ustin was already in the guard. Perhaps his early induction would mean no final gift. Or perhaps the green cloak he wore was the final gift from the man who had given him his early induction. It was beginning to feel like more of a hindrance than a help.

“Messenger,” the corporal said before Ustin had passed through the gate. Ustin stopped to look at the man. The corporal looked Ustin in the face. “You should have broken his wrist.”

Ustin experienced a variety of reactions at each gate. Some corporals opened the gate immediately. Some asked to see his first strike pin. Only one other guard taunted him—a woman this time—but the corporal at that gate called her off as soon as she had read the letter. Ustin wondered why the corporal at the ninth gate had allowed the guard to continue taunting after he knew the situation with Arms Master Sylva. She was also a field marshal and the wife of the future grand master. Her disappearance and possible murder at the hands of an assassin who was loose in Kelkaam seemed much more important to Ustin than testing the master tracker's son because he wears a green cloak as a mere messenger. Ustin hoped she was alive. He could not imagine anyone beating her in a fair fight, but that was rarely the circumstance assassins chose. She had been arms master at top ring since before he had started his formal training. She was the youngest

top arms master on record, and she had been the youngest arms master of any level before that. It could be enough to anger some, Ustin thought. She was the only outsider in an insular society that had kept separate from the world for most of the last seven thousand years, and she held three of the highest positions of power; top arms master, field marshal, and the wife of the prince of Kelkaam. Are there those who hate her so much that they would send an assassin after her? Ustin thought of Artrond, the arms master of fourth ring. No, he thought, he was just goading me. But then there were the *Ongyofen*. Certainly one of the traditionalists could have set an assassin on the foreigner, or even their own young prince; the son of a foreigner. It was no secret they had disapproved of Prince Endegar's marriage to her. Many people suspected of having ties to the *Ongyofen* became suddenly sick the night of the wedding and did not attend. The known members had not bothered faking ill. The *Ongyofen* considered even the prophet a foreigner. Ustin supposed the strange little man was a foreigner. He certainly had not been born and raised in Kelkaam. But he had proven himself a prophet over and over again. He had known at what depth the jungle floor would stop receding down from the tops of the cliffs, and now it had been ten years since any movement at the base of the stone pillar had been detected—exactly at the height the prophet had said three hundred years earlier. Still, the original group calling themselves the *Ongyofen* had started the closest thing to a civil war in Kelkaam's history soon after the little man had walked out of the prophet's tower. Ustin shook his head. It was too much for him to take in while running three and a half leagues on two hours of sleep.

When he reached the last gate, the lead guard on duty read the grand master's note and then pointed to a tunnel leading into the pillar. "You'll find water and bunks at the end of the hall."

"But I need to take this last letter to the boat docks," Ustin protested his body's need for rest.

"No one goes into the jungle at night. Not even for this." The head guard at the canopy gate was a sergeant, not a corporal. "We'll have a horse and breakfast ready for you at first light. Sleep now. Run later."

"Yes, sir." Ustin found a long room full of beds and a barrel of clean water with a ladle. He drank as much as his stomach could bare and collapsed on the first bunk without taking off his boots or leathers.

"Ustin, son of Insek."

Ustin sat bolt upright. "Yes, sir."

The sergeant of gate one grinned at Ustin's reflexes. "It's first light. Your mount is ready. You can eat in the saddle."

Ustin nodded and walked passed the man, back down the tunnel, and into the predawn light. Gate one sat above the jungle canopy, but Ustin could hear the fen waking up and going to bed. Like a changing of the guard on a grand scale, the birds trumpeted the signal for sleepers to arise and night walkers to find shelter for the day. Ustin was so disoriented from waking, running, sleeping, and waking again all in a short period that he was not sure which command the birds were giving him. But a guard holding the reins of a dapple-gray made it clear he was to ride. With a boiled egg and as many berries as he

could hold in one hand and the reins in another, Ustin guided his mount through the gate and down the final stretch of the pillar road. He could both hear and feel the jungle getting closer. The birds and canopy dwellers squeaked, squawked and squealed as they gained purchase on their consciousness for the day; at the same time Ustin could feel the rising humidity as he passed by the tops of the crecopia, next to the understory trees and brush, and down to the jungle floor where the trunks of those great trees were covered in moss, fungi, shrubs, and bugs. Once off the slope of the pillar road, he prodded his horse into a canter. He had gone just a few steps when a familiar form waved him down.

CHAPTER 6

THE JUNGLE

Waking up on a jungle floor was as disorienting as when she had first awoken in a foreign body and place earlier that night. The moon was still out, but it had moved straight overhead. The silhouette of the cliff above assured her that she had landed where she had hoped, but the air in the humid jungle environment was stifling compared to the temperate house she had fallen from. Noises came from all around her; chirping bugs and the movement of leaves. The undergrowth she had landed in was thick, like landing in the curled hair of a giant. She could see the moon only because of a hole in the tree canopy created when she had crashed through it; at least she assumed that was why the crecopia above her had some bent branches. Some of the tree's large, waxy leaves were smothered beneath her pack. She would not have imagined such a different climate just from the change in elevation, but then she had never seen a cliff so high. It must be a third of a league, she thought. It was too dark under the canopy to search through the pack, but it was also too dark to be able to maneuver safely through the brush. She was not afraid of dying, but she could get stuck for a long time here as a constant, regenerating source of meat for predators. The Worm would tell her to find a river. What she would give for one of The Cartographer's maps now. Scheming little bastard, she thought. He is probably

behind this. Only one of the others could have planned to interrupt her ceremony while she herself was without body.

She found a torch in a long side pocket of the pouch easily enough, but it took her quite a bit of fishing through pockets and nooks to find sparking stones. The torch lit up on the first strike. She drew her sword from its scabbard and started hacking her way through the underbrush along the base of the cliff. Now she knew why a field marshal had a footman's pack. A cavalry could never make it through all of this foliage.

The torch lasted until the night sky started to give way. Dawn was still an hour off, but by the time the torch sputtered out, she could see well enough. She decided to stop hacking away at the brush and follow the cliff face instead. It felt as though it was leading her around a long curve. Just before dawn she spotted a road that came down from the cliff. She looked down at herself. Anyone who saw her now would see the bloody scrapes she had suffered from her fall and the brown and green stains over her clothes from trudging through the jungle. She decided to abandon the clothes she wore in favor of those at the bottom of her field pack. Looking around to make sure she was alone, she smiled to herself. Propriety among the bugs was unnecessary. The fresh clothes would have felt better had she not been sweating as she put them on. She balled up the used clothing, threw it further back into the woods, and emerged from the brush feeling skittish. She could see no guards or travellers on the road and decided to trust that no one would question her due to her rank; she hoped. She walked out onto the pathway below the cliff. The road chiseled out of the rock must have taken centuries to create. It was cut right out of its environment. The pathway leading away from the cliff and into the jungle was not as clean and smooth. At some point a path had been hacked through the brush

and trees, but the ground was not paved, just stamped down from use. Ground cover and branches intruded along the path, but the canopy of crecopia and shorter trees was uninterrupted above. She headed down the path away from the cliff in hopes of finding a river, an ocean, a way home.

After a short walk down the path, she could hear the sound of horseshoes clomping on packed earth behind her. Someone was coming from the cliff road. There was only one horse. Soon the horse and rider were in sight, and she waited in the middle of the path as they approached. The rider was no more than a boy.

“Ho there,” she called to the rider.

He pulled up short and stared at her. She could not read his expression, flickering as it was between fear, astonishment, and joy. “Arms Master Sylva?”

An arms master as well as a field marshal, she thought, I am just the busy little bee.

“Yes.” She said it plainly and hoped she sounded natural enough. His dialect was so different, it was hard to understand. She was just glad he spoke Imperial.

“You’re safe!”

Devika smiled and held out her arms as if to present herself; and to avoid speaking with her own accent. The boy jumped from the saddle and ran to her. It took every bit of self control not to crouch into a defensive stance. The boy was about to hug her when he seemed to remember something. He straightened, clasped his hands in front of his face, and tilted his head forward ever so slightly. “Field Marshal Sylva.”

The boy was perfectly dignified except for a slight curve of his lips suggesting what he had just said was somehow ironic—or impressive. This was as far as she could let it go. Her voice would cause suspicion, and she certainly did not know what the correct

response to his address was; especially given the boy's obvious relationship to the woman—whose body was now Devika's—which seemed both formal and personal. She hit him in the jaw, swept his legs, and hit him again in the forehead once he was down. Her first inclination was to kill him and leave his body in the brush. But if she were caught by these people, there would be no talking her way out of murder. She searched him first. His belt held a leather pouch containing a sealed note. She opened it and read. So, she thought, this is the first news of my disappearance. How convenient of me to intercept.

Confident he was unconscious, she dragged his body into the brush and rode away from the cliff on his horse.

CHAPTER 7

THE TIGER OF KELKAAM

Ustin stood at attention in the hearth room of the prophet's tower facing the Grand Master of Kelkaam. The tower was round and each room was shaped like a third of a circle. The prophet's personal assistant sat on a cushioned stool near the only outside door. He was a young man—early twenties—and read out of a large, leather-bound tome. The prophet was in another room of the little tower attending to other guests. The odd little man always had a house full of guests, but Ustin had never seen them. He rarely saw the assistant, who was an outsider to Kelkaam; so was the prophet.

The rains in Kelkaam had stopped a month ago, and it was hot outside, even in Spring. But the fire in the hearth blazed and Ustin could tell the room was fighting a chill. He had been in this room many times growing up—the prophet taught history and geography to all the children of Kelkaam—and the same sensation had struck him each time he walked into the tower; no matter how hot it was outside, the air just inside the door was cool, almost to the point of discomfort. The prophet's assistant was warmly dressed with a blanket over his legs.

“Report,” Grand Master Elias said as he receded into one of the prophet's red, velvet arm chairs with oak trim. Ustin noticed how the man slumped like a king on a throne. It

was not a full slump like a lazy child or a drunkard, but a subtle shift from the upright and straight-forward posture the man had shown the night before while calling Ustin to the guard. Instead, the man sat sideways with the weight of his body to one side as if he wanted nothing more than to lean onto the wing of the upholstered chair and fall asleep. Ustin knew how the man felt, but Ustin had taken a nap—two, really. Now he had to report his findings to a powerful and intimidating man who was still a stranger to the young messenger. He had only spoken to him for the first time the night before. Ustin was certain the grand master would think him lunatic.

Ustin began reciting the events of the previous night as if reading a list of inventory from the quartermaster's warehouse. "I took the screw road to the lowest level of the upper city and started at gate ten. The guards were relaxed. The corporal and the cliff watcher were inattentive at my approach. The gate guard had her crossbow out, but it was uncocked. I delivered your message. They had nothing to report and sent me on my way. I could hear the corporal calling his guards to order as I left." Ustin continued telling the events of his run down the spiral road. He told of the altercation at gate nine, the uneventful passes through the other gates, and his rest at the canopy gate as ordered by the sergeant. The grand master stared at the fire while Ustin spoke. Ustin wondered if the man was listening. He swore he saw the Bull smirk at the mention of taking down the cliff watcher at gate nine. Now Ustin was getting close to the part he had rehearsed in his mind all the way back up the spiral road. Before Ustin could tell the grand master what he feared the man would not believe, a knock came at the door.

"Hold," the grand master raised his hand and then stood. "That will be my son."

The prophet's assistant rose to answer, placing his codex gently on the side table while allowing the blanket to fall to the floor. He opened the squint in the door, but before he could speak, a deep voice came from the other side. "It's Endegar. Open up."

The opened door revealed an imposing figure in chain mail who stood on the cement pavement of an unfamiliar city, not the cobbled streets of Kelkaam. The bleak, gray walls of the buildings behind the man had cracks in them—some large enough that the masonry could be seen beneath the plaster. An alleyway ran between two buildings toward other run down structures with missing tiles on the roofs and makeshift shelters leaning against the walls. Prince Endegar, the Tiger of Kelkaam, walked into the tower. The assistant closed the door and sat back down, replaced the blanket over his legs, and opened his codex in his lap again.

Ustin had heard that the prophet's tower existed in many places at once, but he had never actually seen the door open to one of those other places. The reality of it shook him, and he began to feel fevered while his hands became clammy. He no longer wanted to be in this tower. What if the door stopped working and they all became trapped inside or could only leave the tower by going out of a door on the other side of the world? He tried to calm himself. The prophet had been using the tower for three hundred years. Ustin himself had sat through hours of instruction in the next room. But somehow seeing the truth of the tower's inconsistency made Ustin feel as though he had been tricked by a faithful friend.

"What's this about?" The room seemed to shrink with every step the prince took toward his father, and Ustin felt crowded in the tiny, infinite room. This was the closest Ustin had ever been to Prince Endegar. The man loomed over his father, the grand master,

by almost a head, but the grand master was immovable. Tiger and Bull inspected each other with an odd mixture of familiarity and hostility. The prince wore his signature crimson cloak bound at the neck with the sigil of a gold scimitar on an iron ring. It was the same as the one Ustin's father wore. Insek was a prince's man, as were all of the trackers. Most in the fen favored a long sword, spear, or bow, but Prince Endegar kept a round shield on his back partially covering an oversized scimitar with a two-handed hilt that the large man could use with only one hand. His wavy black hair hung free below his shoulders instead of in a warrior's tail. The intimidation Ustin felt in the prince's presence was trumped only by his desire to get out of the prophet's everywhere-and-nowhere tower.

Grand Master Elias spoke in a kind and concerned voice that did not match his aggressive posture: clenched fists with one foot in front of the other pointing straight at the prince. "Sylva and Eljin were attacked last night. Eljin used the passage to the palace; he said his mother had commanded him to come to me while she fought off a cloaked figure."

Grand Master Elias paused, waiting for his son, Prince Endegar, to assimilate that tidbit. Ustin himself had yet to fully assimilate it. Should he tell them now what he had seen? No, he would not interrupt the only nobility Kelkaam had to continue a report he had been asked to hold. Ustin expected the prince to accept his father's empathy with a clasp of shoulders or some physical sign of filial affection. Instead the man glared at his father as if the grand master was to blame for whatever misfortune had befallen the prince's family. The grand master assumed his kingly posture—a subtle shift in his demeanor and the man seemed as tall as his son. The prince abruptly broke eye contact

and headed for the door. Grand Master Elias grabbed the Tiger's arm before the prince could leave the tower. The prince yanked his arm away, but turned to listen to his father.

“When my men got to your house, no one answered. The door was still barred from inside. They broke in and found the assassin Eljin described lying dead in the boy's room. Sylva is missing.”

The prince's jaw clenched harder and harder as his father spoke until Ustin was sure the man's teeth would shatter. Now he should tell the two of them, but the prince spoke first. “Where is the assassin?”

“I left everything as I found it last night.”

When the grand master stopped speaking, Prince Endegar headed out the door again. The prophet's assistant made no move to open it for him, but when the prince opened it himself, the cobbled plaza of Prophet's Square in Kelkaam presented itself outside. The prince ran across the plaza, passed the statue of the first prophet, and headed down a road that led to his home on the wall. Some of the tension drained out of the room behind the prince, and for the first time, Ustin was grateful to be alone with the grand master. Still, he wished to follow the prince out of the tower before the door closed again. The grand master said, “Come, Ustin. We must follow him home.”

With that, the grand master broke into a run. Ustin followed, noticing how the tower room grew colder away from the fire until Ustin passed through the threshold of the tower's door and was blasted by the late Spring heat and humidity of the fen. He had never been so happy to leave a place.

Two guards in green livery stood at the bottom of the hill leading to the home on the wall. Two more stood at the top of the eighty stairs outside the house. These four guards

were older than the gate guards Ustin had seen in the night hours. All four wore green cloaks clasped together with the golden staff. Veterans, Ustin thought. They had killed for the grand master. Half of the door hung by only the top of the three hinges while the rest of the door lay splintered in the entryway—smashed by a battering ram. Ustin followed the grand master into the house and began taking inventory. Besides the door broken down by the guards, nothing seemed amiss in the front of the house.

The hearth room was in disarray. A large chair faced the wall near the entrance. A footstool and side table lay strewn in the corner near the young prince's room. A wood block and a carving knife lay on the floor. The two sword hooks above the fireplace sat deserted. Grand Master Elias and the Young Prince Eljin stared at him from a portrait on the wall. The blood on the floor was in two different places. One spot had a strand of sandy hair. Someone had fallen there and been moved.

The arms master's room had a unique arrangement. The drawers and cabinets were open with women's clothes strewn about here and there. Ustin thought of Arms Master Sylva and began to blush at the sight of her small clothes. The ceiling above an empty torch holder was newly blackened and the room smelled burnt. Candles crowded the table to either side of a mirror. On the bed lay a woman's night shirt. A circle of blood outlined a hole to one side of where her abdomen would have been. A hand had left five streaks of blood across the front. Arms Master Sylva had been wounded. Her pack and the helmet from her armor were gone—just the helmet.

Ustin followed the grand master across the hearth room to the young prince's room. A dog's prone body lay on the floor with his head a little further apart from the shoulders than it should be and dried blood underneath. Prince Endegar knelt next to the bed

inspecting a crumpled corpse that still leaned against the wall with one corner of the bed propped up on him. The window was busted in and the ladder the guards had used to reach it still rested there.

“This is an odd scene.” The prince spoke without acknowledging Ustin and the grand master. Prince Endegar tipped the bed up toward the window and looked at the body beneath. He checked the man’s wound, then his person. Footsteps sounded in the entryway and got closer.

“Yes,” Grand Master Elias agreed. “I believe the man was after Eljin. He probably waited in here for Sylva to put him to bed. But she put Eljin in your bed.”

Endegar nodded.

“So he got Kwon instead,” Grand Master Elias said, gesturing toward the dog. “I assume he always sleeps in here; with or without Eljin? He must have surprised the man. The man killed him and was forced to come after his victim in the other room, but had to fight Sylva to get to him.”

Endegar nodded.

“Eljin said Sylva woke him and there was a man in the room. He swung at Eljin in bed, but the boy slipped away behind his mother. She cornered the man long enough for Eljin to run for the passage. But what happened after Eljin left? That’s where it gets strange.”

Ustin stood just behind the grand master and listened to him speak to his son about an attack on the royal household. Both of them were calm with a tense undercurrent. Like two trackers following dangerous prey.

Endegar suggested, “Perhaps the assassin took down Sylva’s ceremonial blade to use as a shield or a second. It may have been how he injured her by the threshold to the entryway.”

“So you think she survived?”

Endegar growled at his father and moved past him into the hearth room. The prince’s calm ebbed and the tension began to crash. Ustin sidestepped the prince to stay out of his way. The man pointed down at the two brown spots. “The blood on the floor is inconclusive.”

Elias remained calm. “The two spots are the perfect distance for a woman her size to have taken a blade to the side and then bleed out of her mouth at death. The night shirt suggests as much. And the hair in the blood.”

Ustin grew uncomfortable. He needed to complete his report, but had no desire to stand between the two men with nothing but words to protect him.

“The night shirt and her absence make it implausible. Where is the body, who took off her shirt if she was dead, and who killed the man in Eljin’s room?”

“She took down the ceremonial blade as a shield or an off-hand weapon to fight off two assassins. The second assassin killed her after she killed the one in Eljin’s room. The second assassin took at least part of the body for proof of his accomplishment and disposed of the rest. The window in your room is unlatched. The assassin could dispose of her and escape out the very same way.”

“Or perhaps the assassin simply jumped out the window. Jaya herself come to avenge the ancient prophet’s curse on the Six.”

Prince Endegar marched past the grand master for the third time in a quarter glass. Back in Eljin's room he pushed the corpse's head down with his boot, revealing an eye tattooed on the back of his neck.

"Yes. A *gwelamin*." Elias stated. "All the more reason to doubt her survival."

Ustin shuddered at the mention of the immortal Assassin, ancient ruler of the continent of Yoinis, and founder of the *gwelamin*. He found the notion of her more disturbing than the Necromancer, the Destroyer, or even the General, Emperor of Kwel. The idea that her legacy lived on in this age through a secret society of killers was bad enough. The fact that one of them was here in the room made Ustin sick.

Prince Endegar shot back at his father, "*Gwelamins* work alone."

"Not if there is more than one target," Elias defended.

Ustin did not want to be the one to tell the grand master his hypothesis was wrong right here in front of the man's arrogant son. But the longer he kept his mouth shut, the longer the two men had to take each other down the wrong path.

"Why not attack together then? Why take off her shirt? Why bother to dispose of her body and not the other assassin's? The *gwelamin* created their fearsome reputation by leaving their victim's bodies to be found." Prince Endegar gave his father the dead-eyed stare of a warrior. Ustin had seen men stare at each other like that in the ring. He and his companions copied the adults as best they could. They had all agreed Ustin mimicked it best. But Ustin had never seen anything like this before. It was like a living corpse staring at a breathing human being in hatred. Ustin studied the look as best he could. It was a face that would come in handy.

“I’m sure we will find her body.” Grand Master Elias withstood Prince Endegar’s dead-eyed stare and continued. Ustin could not understand how even the Bull of Kelkaam could calmly ignore that look in the prince’s eyes. “I sent the trackers down to the floor of the jungle to see what is underneath your bedroom window.”

“She is down there,” Ustin blurted out. The two men looked at him. The prince still had the look of an angry corpse in his eyes, and Ustin regretted his interruption. Grand Master Elias tilted his head and seemed to remember Ustin as if remembering an old dog who could no longer hunt, or so Ustin thought.

The prince’s look softened back into humanity. “Ustin. What are you doing here?”

“This is the personal messenger to the grand master,” the grand master said, putting a hand on Ustin’s shoulder.

The prince looked at his father again. “He is not yet sixteen.”

Ustin thought he heard disapproval in the prince’s voice. Did he think Ustin unworthy of the green cloak his father had given him? Why was the prince tracking his age? He had never even met the man. The prince was close to Ustin’s father, and the boy’s arms master was the prince’s wife. But it had not occurred to Ustin until this moment that the prince would know who he is.

“He earned his pin yesterday, and I enlisted him as my personal messenger last night.”

Prince Endegar focused all of his attention on Ustin. Ustin felt squeamish. The prince asked in a serious tone, “What did you mean just now? How do you know she is down on the jungle floor?”

“I saw her. And she was alive,” Ustin answered.

The prince seemed to pull himself up to full height by his eyebrows.

“You saw her?” The grand master asked.

“She hailed me as I was riding from the canopy gate to the boat docks. I dismounted and saluted her.” As he spoke, Ustin gained some confidence. He reverted to the tone of a messenger giving a report. The formality acted as a shield against the two men’s incredulous reactions. “She opened her arms to me, and I walked over to greet her. Then she hit me—at least three times. I lay unconscious in the brush until the trackers found me on their way to look under the window.”

“Are you sure it was her?” The grand master asked.

“He’s trained with her for eight years.” The prince’s voice held only minor irritation. He must have been glad to hear his wife was alive. “But why would she strike you? You were her favorite pupil.”

Ustin reeled at that. He knew Arms Master Sylva was fond of him as she seemed to be of all her students. For her husband to say Ustin had been her favorite—the thought overwhelmed him. All he could say in answer to the prince was, “I don’t know.”

“Details,” commanded the prince.

“She was standing on the side of the path to the boat docks. She looked in excellent health and wore fresh clothes. It was obvious she had been sweating, but the only sign of work on her clothing were the fresh scrapes and stains on her boots. She looked in excellent health, though.”

“What was it about her that seemed in such ‘excellent health,’ Messenger?” The grand master asked, the smirk plain on his face this time.

Ustin's assessment of her had been an impression of sorts. Now he tried to picture her as he had seen her that morning. What was different in that image from the last time he had seen her? "The bruise on her face was gone."

"What bruise?" Prince Endegar asked.

"She had a nice puffer on her right cheek from her duel with Artrond," the grand master answered. The prince ground his teeth again. The grand master looked back to Ustin. "Is that it? Just the healed bruise?"

Ustin kept the picture of her in his mind. "She was somehow...softer. Prettier?"

Prince Endegar raised his eyebrows again.

The grand master grinned. "Prettier?"

Ustin felt the heat in his face, but tried not to let it get in the way of his observations. He looked closer at the image in his mind. "She had lost her tan. She looked like she had never been in the sun, but she wasn't pale or sickly looking. She still had the rose cheeks of a healthy person—a fair-skinned person." Then Ustin realized, "Scars! She didn't have any scars on her face or neck."

The two men looked at him hard. He wanted to shrink inside out and hide behind his own internal organs. His heart felt so big from the pounding in his chest that he was sure the rest of him could fit inside of it. Ustin got down on one knee. "I swear it, by my loyalty to the prophet and Kelkaam. The arms master had a face as fresh as if she had been newly born in her adult body."

Both men looked disdainful. The grand master reached down and pulled on the collar of Ustin's leather until the messenger was back on his feet. "You were not born to kneel."

Ustin flushed with confusion. He had seen guards kneel before their superiors many times, but somehow he had offended the Bull and the Tiger of Kelkaam. Ustin had dreamed of having a title like his father—the Peregrine—but suddenly he felt like a flea. He pictured the way his father stood both humble and strong and mimicked the pose. The three men were quiet for a long time. The prince and grand master studied each other until Ustin wondered if they had some special way to communicate without sound.

The grand master broke the silence first. “At least we know she’s alive.”

“It doesn’t explain much. The candles?” Prince Endegar asked.

“Maybe she needed light to check the wound in her side. Between the candles and the torch this place would have been lit up like midday,” the grand master hypothesized.

“She didn’t like torches in the house, but you could be right.” The prince nodded.

Then his frustration set in. “What about the mess in the room? The missing helmet? Why leave with the *gwelamin’s* sword instead of her own? And how did she get out unnoticed? Where is she going? Why attack Ustin?”

It was strange for Ustin to hear the prince use his name with familiarity. He knew his father, Insek, would die for the prince. He had come close a few times. But Ustin himself had not spoken to the prince until now and had rarely seen him before. When he had seen the man it was from a distance, and Ustin was sure the man had never noticed him. Before last night he would have said the same about the grand master. Now the two most powerful men in Kelkaam were paying him more attention than he was comfortable with.

“She could have gotten out unnoticed through the window,” the grand master suggested.

“Without a grapple or knotted rope? You insisted we smooth the walls for a hundred feet in either direction before leaving the fortress to live here.”

“Spikes?”

“All the way down the cliff? No one has ever done that before. If she only scaled down to the road, she would have had to pass through the gates. I assume you’ve checked with the guards.”

The grand master looked at Ustin and then back at the prince. “No sightings, but we should check the walls. I’ve had every guard on war duty since Eljin showed up in my room last night. Ustin delivered notices to each of the ten gates and the boat docks.”

“Sir,” Ustin interjected. He felt the heat rising again.

“Messenger,” the grand master responded.

“My incident with Arms Master Sylva happened on the way to the boat docks. I was unconscious for the better part of an hour before the trackers found me, and the arms master took my horse and the last message. Two trackers went back to the canopy gate and took another copy of your message on horseback to the docks for me. She could have been across the river, down the river, or far into the jungle by then.”

“Which trackers?” asked Prince Endegar. The trackers were his men.

“Aaden and Iivin, sir.”

The prince nodded. “They will report as soon as they can. The question remains: why did she leave?”

“Endegar,” the grand master said almost gently, “Since hearing that she was alive, my thoughts on the matter have ranged from logical to understandable to impossible.”

“Tell me.”

“There were two assassins and she chased after the second; she believed it was an inside job and didn’t feel safe in Kelkaam; she is under a spell or not herself; she got a concussion and went lunatic; after twenty years she suddenly decided to go home; she’s dead and Ustin saw an imposter or a twin sister; she is a spy and the assassin’s people were going to out her...”

“She’s not a spy!” Ustin blurted. He regretted speaking as the words tumbled out, but it was too late. The grand master and the prince looked at him in unison for the second time. Ustin resumed his humble stance. “Sorry, sirs.”

“Ustin is right,” Prince Endegar told his father, “I’m sure that fit into the impossible category.”

“I am open to any and all explanations, even the impossible ones,” the grand master said and then looked at Ustin. “Personal loyalties aside.”

Endegar puffed. “Crazy old fool. Speculations are useless.”

“An assassin tried to end our line.”

“Like that matters,” the prince’s voice raised. “Assassins wouldn’t know...”

“Endegar!” Grand Master Elias presented himself as a king. His eyes were every bit as stone cold as his son’s had been earlier. The man transformed from his fatherly stance, slouching forward with empathy, and towered straight up, becoming as immovable as the pillar of rock he ruled. “She knew.”

The prince was silent for a moment. Then he snarled, “I’m going after her.”

“And what of the prophet’s errands?”

“Winston will understand.”

Ustin knew the prophet's name was Winston, but had never heard anyone use it informally. To his mind it had always been a useless piece of trivia—the prophet's first name is Winston, but you must always refer to him as the "Prophet." The grand master relaxed into his fatherly pose. "You should see your son first."

"Ustin, son of Insek," the prince addressed him, ignoring the grand master.

Ustin stood at attention. "Sir."

"Change to reds. You're coming with me."

Ustin looked at the grand master who was looking at his son.

"You cannot command my green cloaks while they are in my personal service," the older man said.

"He was meant for me, and you know it." The intensity in the prince's voice astonished Ustin. The prince took a calming breath and continued firmly, "Release him to me."

The grand master clenched his jaw the same way his son had earlier. Prince Endegar squared his shoulders and rose to his full height. Ustin stood bewildered. After another tense moment the grand master conceded, "Ustin, son of Insek, I release you from your duty as my personal messenger."

Ustin felt a pang of disappointment. He had been personal messenger for the Grand Master of Kelkaam, given a green cloak his first night on duty, and commissioned for a special task. Now the man he had entrusted with his allegiance was releasing him to his son after only half a day.

Prince Endegar wasted no time. “Ustin, son of Insek, as Prince of Kelkaam I commission you to full guard duty with the rank of guard. You will be my personal assistant in the search for Arms Master Sylva.”

Ustin still stood at attention and was beginning to fear his knees would buckle. “Yes, sir.”

“Insek will have something to say about you taking his son on what could be a dangerous hunt.”

“The Peregrine will understand,” Prince Endegar told his father and then looked at Ustin. Ustin felt the invisible claws of the Tiger of Kelkaam prodding at him, feeling him out, playing with his food. “It is time to discover what kind of creature you are.”

CHAPTER 8

STRANGERS

Winston stood as far away from the prophet's tower as he could without pain. The ringing in his ears was mild, but would grow uncomfortably louder if he took one more step. Two more steps would result in so much noise, that he would crumple to the ground holding his hands to his ears and then vomit before writhing back to the comfort of his inner circle. The streets of Old Tahpella already reeked of human waste and infection. The sewers in this older district of Tahpella had been broken since the last cataclysm. No need to add my own stench, thought Winston. But he did wish the cloaked figure in front of him would turn around and speak to him.

"Excuse me," Winston called for the third time. "May I ask if you have seen this person or someone with similar markings?"

Each time he asked, Winston held up the sketch of a severely scar-faced man. A useless gesture since the cloaked figure refused to turn and look or even acknowledge Winston's presence. The man stood with his back turned, a slight slouch in his shoulders, and ignored Winston. Suspicious now, Winston put two fingers in his mouth and whistled the signal he and Stratos's men had agreed on. He doubted any of them were close

enough to hear. The cloaked figure gave no reaction to the shrill sound. Within moments Marcus trotted up from behind Winston. He had been closer than Winston expected.

“I’ve been looking for you,” said the soldier in scraps. Stratos’s men preferred to dress like their neighbors near the safe house they had built. Marcus’ shabby cloak concealed a shortsword and his patched shirt lay over chain mail. It was not the best disguise. Fighting men would likely know what he was, and commoners would think he looked odd with his clothing as puffed out as they were. But earlier that day Winston had seen a man with a blanket wrapped around him just under his armpits and a pillow on his back. The outfit had been tied around the man’s waist with a single tattered strand of rope which held his only two possessions to his body like a snail. The blanket and pillow fell away from him above the tie, leaving his dirty chest and back exposed to any tall enough to see. So odd looks were more common than commoners in this part of town.

“You found me. I cannot seem to get this person’s attention and it has made me suspicious. Would you?”

Marcus looked at the cloaked figure with back turned to them and shrugged. As he stepped forward, he bumped into Winston a little harder than the little man expected. Winston stumbled forward and a burst of noise erupted in his head. He arched his back violently to escape the pain he felt himself headed toward, and fell over completely, landing in the dull hum of safety. Marcus turned at the sound of Winston tumbling over rubble. “Did I knock you down?”

“I am fine. Fine.” Winston said. The cloaked figure stood motionless at the sounds of a man falling over the rubble of this broken section of Tahpella.

Marcus offered a hand, but Winston already had his feet under him again. "I am fine. You see though how this person just stands there as if they cannot hear all of this commotion? Ask that figure what their business is and if they have seen the man we are looking for."

Marcus tapped the cloaked figure on the shoulder. The man startled as he turned around and took a step back. Marcus leaned away from the man and held a hand up. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to frighten you."

The man looked dumbly back at Marcus. Marcus held up his own copy of the sketch for the cloaked figure to see. "Have you seen this man or someone like it?"

The man in the cloak was well-wrinkled. Old for someone living on the street. Perhaps he had just come into his misfortune. He lifted two fingers to his eyes, then pointed the fingers at the picture, and tilted his head.

Marcus nodded.

The man shook his head. Winston shook his own head. He had grown so paranoid as to suspect a deaf beggar of mischief or danger. Winston watched as the deaf man turned to leave. Winston put his hand to his pouch and realized it was empty. "Marcus, I am out of coins. Would you give the man something. I can pay you back with interest as soon as I am in the tower again."

"I think we'd best get back to your tower without delay, sir. The city guards have left the entrance, but we don't know for how long."

Winston spared one more glance for the deaf man wishing he had been able to give him something before hustling toward the tower with Marcus. The walls of abandoned buildings crumbled to either side of the streets. Some times walls fell in on their homeless

inhabitants, adding to the putrefaction in the air. Winston knew the people living (and dying) in this quarter of the city would never improve their own circumstance. He had given up asking “why” centuries ago. The disregard of the poor had made Old Tahpella perfect for Stratos’s men to set up a safe house. It also made a decent cover for the comings and goings of visitors to the prophet’s tower, though no mortal being had chosen the location of *that* structure. But soon after Winston had joined the search for the scar-faced man, guards from the city had shown up at the tower demanding that the master of the place come out for questioning. Alexander had refused them. They tried to break down the door like thousands before them had tried for thousands of years at every prophet’s tower around the world. After the pointlessness of it had set in, the guards had resolved to sit and wait for someone, anyone, to come out for food or on some other errand. Finally, after four days of being trapped outside of his home, Winston had an opportunity to get back to his tower. He had been sleeping in Stratos’s safe house with Marcus and his companions.

Stratos’s men had surveyed the city for days, seeking out the scar-faced man who had stood Endegar up for a meeting. Three hundred years of rumors, sightings, and investigations yet Winston was no closer to finding the scar-faced men or learning their intentions than he had been the last time one of them had surfaced. Unable to travel any further than a sixth-league from his tower was a hindrance not worth complaining about. The power that had limited his movements was itself immovable. But Winston had done his part in the search, canvassing his measure of the city—the area around the prophet’s tower—with questions and inquiries. He had asked beggars, whores, their patrons, some

peddlers, and what few proprietors the ruined part of Tahpella still held if they had seen the man in his drawing or anyone with similar markings. But nobody had.

Winston had also talked to a few people to whom he had given a gold coin—an emperor, no less—in the last two months. No one knows how they had spent it. It would have bought a year’s worth of food, two pair of shoes, and plenty of clothes. The whores and some peddlers had likely done good business with them. Or they had been robbed trying to figure out how to break it into usable sums. All of them were still wearing rags and living in Old Tahpella. He had given them another gold emperor today, knowing it would do no good. In another age Winston had thought he had the answer to these kinds of problems. But after centuries of trying everything he could think of, he knew: Riches may oscillate, but poverty never decays. He could not remember where he had first heard that quote, but he was sure it had not been spoken by the member of The Six to whom it had long been attributed.

Somehow the scar-faced men knew that he was looking for them, and they eluded him with impunity. Why taunt him? Why leave a message for Endegar at Winston’s tower? Winston’s agents had met them in the past. His network reached every corner of Kwel—all the places he could no longer go. Some of those agents had gone missing. Others had come back with little or no information other than having seen a scar-faced man. In his tower, Winston had several drawings his agents had collected or drawn themselves of the scar-faced men they had met. Winston had once tried to reconstruct the good parts of the faces into one face to be sure it was not one of The Six troubling the returned prophet. The scars had been made too similar to give him any more of the face than what the scarred men wanted recognized.

Marcus slowed down in front of a dilapidated old building and whistled the same call Winston had used to find him. The call was returned and Marcus led Winston around one side of the building to an alleyway with men seemingly strewn about as if drunk or dead. They were neither. Marcus walked passed the guards to the safe house and the cleverly hidden murder holes in the walls around them. He knocked on a shabby looking door at the end of the alley in a stilted rhythm that obviously had meaning to those inside. The squint in the door opened and someone peered out. “Marcus and Winston.”

“It’s time to get Winston back to his tower. The guards left this morning for the first time in four days.”

“The others aren’t back from the main city yet.”

“Can someone else come with us? Who knows whether the guards will come back or be replaced.”

The squint closed again. After several moments of silence, a series of scrapes and clicks sounded on the other side of the door as the measures of security were unlocked and unlatched. The shabby door opened to reveal its true nature: a thick metal door with the old wooden one stuck to the front. Two men dressed like Marcus stepped out. They held crossbows and handed one to Marcus. “Let’s go.”

“Let me see if it’s still clear,” Marcus halted around the corner from the tower.

Winston nodded. The other two men stood behind him. Marcus drew his sword from under his cloak and peeked down the alley way that lead most directly to the door of the prophet’s tower. “It’s clear from this side. We should circle around and make sure it’s clear from all points of entry. I don’t want to be trapped in this alleyway.”

“It’s fine, Marcus,” one of the other men said. “Let’s get this done.”

Marcus looked at Winston. Winston shrugged. “I am not worried for myself. As long as the three of you have a way out.”

“Alright then,” Marcus conceded. “We’ll take the alley down and leave by the opposite alley once Winston is inside.”

The man who had spoken nodded. Marcus led them down the alleyway with his shield held high at an angle to protect against arrows or bolts from above or ahead. He held the crossbow cocked and ready in his other hand. The two men behind did the same, one walking next to Winston, the other walking backwards behind. Winston felt like a noble under parasols of steel. Winston had not figured out the structure of Stratos’s military force, but it contained levels of ranks that had a circular pattern. Marcus was in charge of the strategy, but the man behind had authority to over rule Marcus. Marcus was still the strategist, so came up with another plan which the man approved. Winston assumed the third man, the biggest of the three, was the muscle. He hoped the muscle would prove unnecessary.

At the end of the alley, everything looked clear, but the men kept their shields up. As they entered the clearing, they tightened their ring around Winston. Winston smirked. He could appreciate the men’s caution. It was what had kept the original seventeen members of Stratos’s band alive and allowed it to grow into the army it was now. But sometimes it felt ridiculous. Winston crouched and played the game. The others walked like discombobulated turtles protecting their shell-less fish friend. When they got to the door, the three soldiers created a barrier of shields surrounding Winston. The little white-haired

man placed his hand on the door handle and pushed inward. Before shutting the door, he turned to the three men, "Thank you."

Alexander looked up from the codex he had been reading on the couch. "Elias has been by three times a day to speak to you."

Winston exhaled heavily. He turned back to the door, held the latch on the squint, focused on Kelkaam, and opened the little window in the door. A messenger stood just outside the door. "Tell the grand master the prophet is back in his tower."

The messenger nodded and ran off toward the fortress in Kelkaam.

"Did you find him?" Alexander asked.

"No," Winston walked around the couch and sat heavily in one of the armchairs by the fire.

"You stayed away because of the city guard?"

"Yes. What did they want?"

"A man matching your description is accused of murder in Tahpella. Another witness claimed this is the murderer's residence."

"I see." And he did.

Marcus led the other two men around to the back of the tower. As soon as they were in view of the alleyway behind they started down it, still crouching in the best formation they could given there were only three of them. Marcus' heart starting pounding. He could feel the pressure of invisible forces around him. "Stay true."

"You're more paranoid than normal, Marcus," said the lieutenant.

"That's my post," he replied.

“True, but this is a back alley in a ruined part of an ancient city.”

“An enemy city,” Marcus said. “Try not to be so naive as to think no one knows we’re here.”

“The part of an enemy city that hasn’t been patrolled since the Sixth Age when the General himself still ruled it. I’ll buy drinks for the three of us if we’re attacked between here and the safe house.”

“Deal,” both Marcus and the strong arm said.

The three of them went silent again except for the sounds of their feet slowly shuffling through the rubble of Old Tahpella. When they reached the center of the alley, the volley Marcus felt was inevitable came. Archers on either side of the alley shot simultaneously at the three men in the middle. Marcus called out, “Fire toward the tower only! That’s our way out now.”

The lieutenant in back knelt on his left and balanced his crossbow on his right knee. The shot killed one of the archers closest to Winston’s tower. The man in the middle knelt and held his shield over head to protect the three of them from overhead fire if it came. When it comes, thought Marcus. Marcus himself handed his crossbow to the shooter and drew his sword in anticipation of a charge from the other side. The lieutenant fired a shot with Marcus’ bow before the attackers’ second volley came. Two were now dead at the tower side of the alley. The man in the middle handed the lieutenant his bow. After the second volley of enemy arrows broke on their shield, the lieutenant downed a third man and drew his sword. They left the crossbows on the ground and headed back toward the tower. The third volley came from above as well as from in front and behind. It lavished them with thuds as steel-tipped arrows drummed against their shield. Shattering wood

drifted around them like confetti. They continued toward the archers between them and the tower. More arrows fell and more strips of wood spread around them. The lieutenant cursed as an arrow ricocheted under his shield and stuck in his foot. The tortoise was limping now.

“Steady,” Marcus encouraged. “We’re almost there.”

Between volleys, the lieutenant and the strong arm managed to trade shields, putting the strong arm at the front. After the next volley, the lieutenant shouted, “Left!”

The three men leapt into the archers between them and the tower, cutting them down and putting their backs to the wall around the corner and out of the opposite archers’ site. The volleys stopped, but a bigger problem emerged. Armored men flooded into the spaces around the tower, blocking the trio from the front door with spears and shields. More men came running down the alley they had just escaped to block off all chance of exit.

“We only need one,” announced a voice from behind the ranks.

“You’ll need to take all three,” Marcus called out. “The lieutenant here owes us drinks.”

Marcus did not have time to smile between the end of his sentence and the end of the spear that pierced his throat. What a terrible way to die, thought Marcus, falling to his knees. The piercing wound bled slowly and Marcus had too much time to think about whether he would bleed to death before he asphyxiated.

When Alexander opened the door, all was peaceful in the city square at Kelkaam. Spring blossomed in the trees and *Fenpela* walked through the park without much thought for the rest of the world. Grand Master Elias stormed out of that beautiful scene

and into Winston's hearth room. Master Tracker Insek followed close behind with a parcel in his arms and something akin to an emotion on his face.

"Endegar has gone looking for Sylva," Elias said.

"Have you not found her?" Winston inquired. He stood from his arm chair, not wanting the two *Fenpela* men to tower over him more than necessary.

"She's alive," replied Elias.

Winston had been sure Sylva must have died based on the description Elias had given of Endegar's home. The woman was crafty to be sure, but he doubted anyone could scale down the pillar or even sneak down unseen. But then, an assassin had sneaked up—possibly more than one. Sylva had been crafty as a girl too. In the week she had lived with Winston after her rescue, she had snuck into every locked room, cabinet, and drawer in the whole tower. Not that she had discovered much. Her homeland had been separated from the rest of the world long enough that she could not even read Imperial.

"You've been gone too long, old man. We have discovered much since you left."

Elias started clenching his teeth in that annoying manner he shared with his son. Both men would likely die of lockjaw without having touched a single piece of rust. Winston was amazed that after the centuries certain habits still irritated him.

"So sorry to have inconvenienced you, Grand Master Elias," Winston said. "Whatever may I do to be of service?"

Elias gave Winston the deadeye, but Winston smiled and waited for a response.

Elias turned to the Peregrine. "Insek, report."

"Someone definitely fell from underneath the prince's window. We found the point of impact directly below Prince Endegar's house on the wall, but there was no one there. No

corpse either. There was a break in the canopy above and something about the size of a soldier and a pack had landed beneath. I climbed up the tree with the most broken branches and found several bits of thread matching a field marshal's uniform and pack. I sent the others to spiral out. They found a helmet and a spent torch with no tracks leading to or from either object. I led the rest of the trackers down a single trail of footprints starting at, and leading away from the point of impact." Insek paused to make sure the prophet had caught his meaning thus far. Winston had become very patient over the centuries. He stared at the man until the master tracker continued. "The prints went toward the low ground at first, and the person hacked a path with what must have been a sword—not a proper machete. Inefficient strikes against the foliage suggest the person is not familiar with jungle life. They never got far from the pillar. We found another spent torch along the path at which point the prints follow along the base of the stone without as much hacking. Closer to the road we found a shredded set of field marshal's clothes. They were stained with vegetation and blood."

Winston listened to the scenario, knowing full well that the men hoped he would have an explanation. All evidence led to the idea that someone had jumped from the prince's window or somewhere along the face of the pillar beneath, fallen through every layer of the canopy, landed on the jungle floor, and walked away—seemingly unharmed. Winston could make no sense of it. The facts oscillated in his mind; constantly moving but never getting anywhere. But there had to be an explanation. "How can you be sure this is not an elaborate attempt to confuse us?"

"I can't imagine how, but such a thing is always a consideration and impossible to prove up until one proves it." Then Insek held shreds of clothing out to the prophet. The

Peregrine continued his report using the clothes to illustrate his points. “The scrapes and holes are what you would expect from a drop through the canopy, but there is much less blood around the wounds than I would have guessed. This whitish ring pattern is inside all of the clothing. It is thicker around the blood stains. None of us have ever seen anything like it.”

Winston felt the unfamiliar sensation of surprise expressed on his face: the blink of his eyes and stretching of skin around them, the compression of his forehead, and a little twitch of his nose. It was a rare effect on him after all these years. He refrained from ripping the clothes right out of the Peregrine’s hands.

“What is it?” Elias asked Winston. The grand master had noticed the prophet’s uncharacteristic reaction.

“None of us can say for sure,” Insek said. He thought the grand master had spoken to him. “The pattern is consistent with popped bubbles, but the substance is chalky; as if it was created from boiling, liquid bones.”

“An apt description,” Winston said. Frustration overcame him as he wished to see the evidence in Endegar’s home. He was sure the prince had chosen his house on the wall in part because it was out of Winston’s reach. He looked at Elias. “Tell me again everything that was taken from your son’s home.”

“The pack, that pair of clothes,” Elias gestured to the scraps in Insek’s hands, “the assassin’s blade, though not Sylva’s own weapon, her helmet, though not the rest of her armor, a torch, and the short sword that used to hang above the mantle.”

“Describe it,” commanded Winston.

“What?”

“The short sword,” Winston said. He controlled his impatience by focusing on the measure of his words.

“Well, it was bronze, as if from a time long past, yet it shined as though it was newly forged and polished. Sylva brought it with her from her homeland. She said she had found it under water near her home.”

How could I have missed that, Winston wondered. He had discovered Sylva when she knocked on a prophet’s tower that he had not known existed. When he opened the door all those years ago, a twelve-year-old girl stood barefoot on sand and lava rock atop the tiniest desert island Winston had ever seen. At high tide, only a few feet of rock and sand separated the tower from the ocean. At low tide the water dropped precipitously away leaving more volcanic rock exposed. She had been bloodied; not a single limb was unscraped. She was faint from dehydration. Her name was Sylva, but beyond that Winston could barely make out her language.

“Come in, come in, poor child,” he had offered, but she looked to the side of his door. A chest big enough that the girl could have fit inside of it had sat next to the tower entrance. The unfamiliar wood from which it had been made unsettled Winston who had been around the world several times and thought he knew its inhabitants—human and otherwise—better than anyone. Yet there he had stood in the middle of a foreign sea with a light-haired girl and her exotic trunk. When he moved toward the latch, Sylva had jumped on it. Winston had held his hands up and away to show that he would not pry. The bottom of her feet bled from her careless dash across the sharp ground to her trunk. She slid off of it and looked into the tower door. Winston could tell that she wanted desperately to come in but had been unwilling to leave her only possessions behind. How

she had ended up here with an intact trunk would be quite a story if he could teach her proper Imperial.

After a few moments, Winston had squatted next to the side of the trunk and motioned that he would pull it into the tower. Sylva had thought for a moment, nodded, and then went to the opposite side to push while he pulled. Winston had smiled to himself at the helpful yet suspicious girl. Indeed she had every right to be suspicious. Once settled into a room and sleeping, Winston had gone through every item in that chest looking for anything dangerous that the girl may have brought into his home—knowingly or in ignorance. It would seem here and now he could have saved a lot of pain and trouble if he had known the girl had already hidden that blade outside of her trunk before going to sleep that night some twenty plus years ago. He never would have let her keep it. Too late. He said to Elias, “Describe the guard of the blade.”

“The guard?” Elias asked. “Well, I believe both sides of it are fashioned in the shape of topless women’s torsos.”

“And your son is now in pursuit of this woman who falls for hundreds of feet and walks away unharmed?”

“Sylva, yes. She was seen by Ustin on the road and a dozen or more people at the boat docks. She’s on her way down the river. Endegar is on the ridge while Captain Ochen floats down to catch up to her.”

“Did anyone speak to her?”

“Yes. Ustin spoke to her for a moment before she knocked him unconscious and dragged him into the jungle. He said her scars were gone and her skin as fair as if it had never touched sunlight.”

“*Skiit*,” Winston swore. “The boy’s lucky to live. Did anyone else speak to her?”

“Yes. A young corporal at the boat docks. She asked for the fastest boat one person could navigate and as many supplies as it would safely hold.”

Winston shook his head.

“What is it, Winston?” Elias leaned in toward him. Winston could tell the man was worried.

“I must speak to Ustin and the corporal from the boat docks.”

“Insek can bring the corporal to you,” Elias said, “but Ustin is with Endegar on the ridge.”

“Sixes! You sent him with Endegar?” That grim look on the Peregrine’s face made sense now. His chick had left the nest.

“Endegar raised him to full guard and took him. He thought it logical since the boy had been her favorite student and one of the last to speak with her.”

“He is not even sixteen yet.” Winston looked from Elias to Ustin’s father. “What do you have to say about this?”

The Peregrine’s hooded gaze met the angry prophet’s scowl without flinching. “We knew this day would come. A few days early matters not. The mission is most unfortunate, but Ustin is as ready now as he was ever going to be.”

“Fools. The both of you.” Winston’s cold tone had the desired effect. The two men looked at each other. Insek’s lips tightened ever so slightly. It was the first crack in his stoic demeanor that Winston could remember seeing. The Voice remained silent. Winston was on his own. If he knew it would be fine—that it was meant to be—he could live with the uncertainty. He had no such reassurance. “That woman is not Sylva. It is Sylva’s

body, but the soul inside that body is more dangerous than I can express. You must send men after both parties to warn them and assist in keeping track of her, but they must not approach her. I need to gather those who can be trusted to capture her, but until such time as they can give chase, your men—especially Ustin and Endegar—must keep their distance.”

CHAPTER 9

DOWN THE RIVER

Devika continued leaning against her pack with her legs stretched forward like a bargeman. Most of the day she had wondered about where she was, taken note of the vegetation along the westerly shore and marvelled at the height of the easterly cliff and the mountains she could see far to the south. When she first rowed away from the boat docks, she had caught a glimpse of the massive pillar from which she had jumped the night before. From over three leagues away she could see it above the enormous trees on the shore.

She had already decided she would drift all night. The sky dimmed and soon the cliff on the left and tree line on the right became silhouettes as she travelled south between them. One by one stars began to peek out from behind the darkening blue above. Then two or three would show up—one after another, four after those—until the sky she saw between the cliff and treeline was a parallel river of stars high above the water that carried her down stream. She was unsure whether to be relieved or not when she recognized the stars. At least she was back in the world to see them; even if they told her she was in the wrong hemisphere.

She exhaled hard and wondered at how she could have been carried off so far from home. If she were in the north, she was even further away than she had feared. What had happened during the last ceremony? She positioned herself lower down on the packs so that her sore lower back would be on the bedroll instead. It is not silk and feathers, she thought, but I will have to be a soldier once more; until I am home again in my power. She was afraid to sleep. It was dangerous floating down the river at night, but she felt a sense of urgency. The thought of Desna brought a sense of hope and longing followed by a tightened stomach and nausea. She had kept the girl—ha, girl, she thought—alive all these years, but half-a-world away Desna had no protection from enemies or age. If something terrible had happened—a rebellion, a coup, an attack—she would be in danger. Devika's hands tingled at the thought of losing the daughter she had worked so hard to bare and preserve. There is nothing for it now, she told herself again. And thus the cycle began anew: focus on the scenery as long as possible, wonder how she had gotten here, imagine what could have happened, and come back to a sickened state of fear for Desna. She would get back and set things right.

The sturdy little vessel made good time in the current. She slid down the river without rowing or managing much other than the rudder, her sustained boredom, and her anxiety when her mind wandered to the places she had no control over. The man who had helped her with the boat had provided every supply possible except for a map. She still had no idea where she was other than north. The body she had inherited had been more useful than she could have hoped. The woman was an even higher rank than she suspected when she had first seen her armor in the little stone house. A strange culture, she thought, that houses high ranking officers in such small quarters. The house had been thrice the size of

a commoner's and well built, she granted. The stone work had been masterful. On the other hand, all of the houses and buildings she had seen by the river had been well built too. Even the river boats she had seen the morning before had a craftsmanship equal to the incredible things built by Falk or Marzhonee.

Her third day on the river took her west instead of south. The cliff remained on her left with only jungle to her right. The morning of her fourth day the river turned south again, and she could see huge mountains looming in the distance. The river must flow around their base, she thought. In the late afternoon she found that the base of the mountain was actually another cliff. She would pass between the two cliffs and remain in shadow for as long as they mirrored each other. She had expected the eastern cliff to fall off before reaching the sea. Instead the left cliff rose in height and would soon be matched on her right.

She could no longer see the abstract pillar she had jumped from, but she remembered the double meaning of Kelkaam; hill city in Imperial, but hidden city in Necromantic. It made more sense than she had first thought. The "hill" that the city was on sat in a hidden valley. One would have to find the valley first, then explore it thoroughly enough to find the pillar. Even finding the pillar and the road at its base would not indicate the amount of civilization that existed at its top.

Incredible, she thought. She had been all over the seven continents during the conquest and never seen any land quite like this. The island nations had put up enough of a fight to stay free. She must be on one of them. It made sense. Perhaps these island people had been the ones to interrupt her last ceremony. They must have waited until her spirit had left her body and then ambushed the altar. She had left the neighboring islands

alone for the most part and could not imagine why an island nation in the northern hemisphere would be the attackers on her nation so far south. Perhaps her people would have more insight. The empire would have fought them off. The other six must know where this place is and who these people are. But if so, why had they not come for her?

With nothing else to do, she decided to check her supplies and the tie downs for the tenth time that day. She turned first to the back of the boat and inspected every knot. These jungle people know their business, she thought, satisfied that everything had remained so well packed for two days straight now. Before she turned to the front supplies, something caught her eye. She looked up to see a huge river boat complete with ten oars on a side bearing down on her. There was no way she could out run it and no where to run to anyway. She would have to allow them to hail her. Could they know who she really was? By now they would have realized that something was amiss. The woman had a child and husband who would look for her. A shame, she thought, I was beginning to like this body. I will have to switch sooner than later.

The boat was travelling twice the speed of the current. Good, she thought, anticipation is such a waste of time. As the boat came near, the oars rose out of the water and the craft glided alongside her own. A gnarled man with a gnarled face looked over the side without speaking. Captain, she guessed. She outranked him. She recognized him from the morning before. He had waved to her, and his features were unforgettable; like a mangrove on legs. They looked at each other for a long time. He seemed determined not to speak first. He broke the stare and looked up at the sky. They must have been rowing hard for three and half days to catch up. He looked back at her. The hopelessness of the

situation was clear to her. If they decided to take her, they could. So she asked, “Captain, is there a problem?”

“I’ve been sent to bring you back home. Will you come?” The man spoke as if to an injured animal. Perhaps they had found the messenger she had left behind and now worried about this woman, Sylva, and her sanity. This man seemed to know the woman personally. That could be problematic for her.

“By whose order?” She asked with a tone of authority, which was natural for her.

“By Elias, the Grand Master of Kelkaam, your father-in-law.” The man’s tone became less familiar to mirror her own. He had been friends with this Sylva, and had discarded protocol with her in the past. Now she had forced him back into it. That could work to her advantage in the short term. The man witnessed her erratic behavior, but he would not shackle a field marshal to bring her home if she was at least cordial and cooperative. At least she hoped this was true.

“I am afraid I cannot go back yet.” She tried to mimic his dialect, but the shape of these lips, mouth, and tongue were new to her. She was not as talented in language as Woorin had been. The little man had created the language she now spoke.

“Where are you headed?”

“My business is my own, Captain.” She kept her tone formal. “By what order of the grand master do you come to take me away from it?”

The captain looked at her for a long time before answering. She wondered if he was contemplating whether or not to tell her the truth. When he spoke, she decided he must not be confident in his skills as a liar. “When your son escaped assassination, the grand master sent his men to your house and found an assassin slain in your son’s room. Your

doors were still locked from the inside, but you were nowhere to be found. The grand master and your husband, the prince, have the entire pillar on lock down looking for accomplices who they figure must have stolen your body. When the prince found out his dead wife had taken a boat out yesterday morning, he grew confused and concerned after an already traumatic afternoon. He personally sent me here with the grand master's orders, so that the truth might be obtained."

"I see," she said. This man did not mince words, nor was he a fool. He had chosen the truth because he wielded it like a sword. She chose to keep quiet and watched as the boatmen took down the green canvas that covered the oarsmen and replaced it with one of maroon. "I have no further truth to tell. If you choose to take me back, it will have to be by force."

The captain was silent. After a moment he turned to his crew. "Keep the oars up. We will accompany Field Marshal Sylva to her destination, wherever that may be."

The rest of the afternoon was uncomfortable with a river boat full of soldiers floating next to her. Having an escort posed many problems. What would they do when she tried to board a ship for the continent? They must intend to block her way before she reaches a certain point. She would have to be rid of them. Before dusk she thought she might have a chance to lose them. As they came closer to the mountains, another ship appeared in front of her and her escort. With sails up and oars out the other ship sped toward her escorts.

"Field Marshal," came the captain's voice, "You must board with us or risk being a target of the *Wogwen*."

“I will back paddle while you move ahead to meet the enemy,” she said, calmly raising her oars out over the water and pulling against the current. The captain spared her a glance before ordering the men to row forward. She thought to pass the fight once it had ensued, but the fight was over before she caught up to it. The two crews traded volleys of arrows until they were thirty strides apart. Then something unexpected happened. Fire sprayed in a stream from the Kelkaam ship. The enemy was engulfed in flames. At first she decided it must have been magic, but as she rowed forward to see the results for herself, she could smell oil. Amazing, she thought, these islanders have learned to spray burning oil at enemy ships. If they remained so advanced in their weaponry, the empire would never conquer them. But she had learned something more valuable than that. This land was in contention. She only had to make it to a merchant port that allowed visitors. It would likely not tolerate an enemy war boat, and she could wait out the captain and his men there. But she worried they would not allow her to approach such a place. If she got close to a city, would they overtake her and use force? Was their cordiality dependent on the idea that she was not going far and would turn back at some point? She could not have them following her. They could not interfere with her trip home. She had to get back to Desna. She would have to escape by any means necessary.

As night fell for the fourth time on her journey to the ocean, she watched a crew member move to a glass casing at the front of his ship. It was a larger version of something she had found on the prow of her own vessel. It smelled of oil, and she assumed it was a lamp of some sort, but she had only guessed at how to light it. The man removed the glass case and struck his lighting stones together a few times until the coarse fabric-like material caught flame. Then he replaced the glass casing. Light beamed out

ahead of the ship. She shook her head at how simple it had been. She had thought of doing that same thing, but had not dared experiment with it at the risk of burning her supplies and her boat.

As the night wore on, she wondered how she would renew herself in private. She would not sleep well in the presence of this foreign force, and certainly could not bleed herself in front of them. They would assume their king's daughter-in-law was committing suicide.

“Field Marshal,” came the captain's voice over the side of his ship. “There are some sandbars under the eastern wall. You could beach there and sleep for the night. Certainly it isn't safe to travel alone in the dark. I believe some are big enough for us to beach as well. We could wait for you.”

“Yes. I believe I will find a place to sleep. Thank you, Captain.”

The sinewy sailor nodded and seemed pleased. She raised the oars again and moved past the coasting river boat. The captain had mentioned some big enough for all of them, but she had no intention of staying with the group. She found the smallest sandbar she could and beached her boat there. The larger ship had to continue on a ways to a beach barely visible from where she had landed. Perfect, she thought, that should be easy enough to get around once I have revived. Then she undressed completely to preserve her clothes and lay on the sand. She could not remember if she had gotten the dagger she now held from the field marshal's pack or from the boat supplies. Either way, it entered her chest with ease.

CHAPTER 10

THE IMPERIAL ROAD

The trees here whispered like jealous friends; in a voice that was meant to be heard. Their leaves moved in the breeze like the hands of an animated talker; a close talker who touches the person they are trying to convince of a half truth as if physical contact is a sign of friendship among strangers. Because they all say the same thing, they must agree with each other. The trees that most bothered Ustin were the birch trees. He felt like they watched him with a hundred eyes. They were sporadic, but it seemed there was always at least one in sight. Just as they turned every corner, leaving behind one lonely birch standing in the front lines of the forest, another one would appear; like sentinels placed perfectly so that no one could pass without their knowing. Even at dusk, as he and Endegar left the road to make camp in the woods, Ustin would look back at the last birch he had seen, waiting for it to disappear from sight as his mare followed Endegar's through the brush. Each time Ustin lost sight of a birch, he would turn in his saddle and see another one up ahead.

Prince Endegar had ridden in silence since they had left the base of Kelkaam three mornings ago. They had ridden to the boat docks; ferried their mounts across the river to the base of the cliff tunnel; and led their horses through the temperate forest above on

foot for nearly three hours before reaching the Imperial Road. They had ridden, camped, ridden all the next day, camped, and ridden all day today in silence. The horses had spoken more than the men.

Both nights Ustin had dutifully brushed down his horse. He would have brushed down the prince's too, but the man preferred to do it himself. The prince also preferred starting the kindling while Ustin gathered wood for the fire. Ustin had thought it his post to set up camp, but the prince was always first to take out his own bedroll, utensils, and the evening's rations for cooking. Not that Prince Endegar had made any of his preferences known through speech. Ustin had to assume everything by what the man himself did. He brushed his horse, so Ustin did the same. He lit the fire, so Ustin gathered wood to keep it going. He took out his bedroll, utensils, and waterskin for dinner, and Ustin followed his lead. The prince had not given a single command in three days, so Ustin assumed that silence was the man's preference.

Their first evening after dinner, Prince Endegar took out two practice swords from scabbards beneath his saddle bags. He handed one to Ustin and then stuck his own in the ground while he took off his shirt. Ustin began to do likewise, but the prince put his arm on Ustin's shoulder and shook his head as lightly as a tracker would. Trackers were always subtle in their movements, as if anything beyond the smallest nod or slightest wave would scare off the beasts of the fields or the reveal their location to an enemy. Ustin kept his leathers on and picked up the dulled long sword. The blade that Ustin had seen hanging on Prince Endegar's back was an enormous scimitar with a two-handed grip. Ustin had never seen anyone else use a scimitar and wondered why the prince did. But now the prince held a regular practice sword. Ustin moved into practice position and

began the *perpleg*. Endegar attacked. Ustin barely realized what was happening before the prince's sword smacked his leather hard enough to bruise. Ustin opened his mouth in surprise and closed it again quickly, but he made no sound. He could play the silence game as well as anyone. He took a defensive stance and waited for the next attack. The prince came in aggressively with *Pektong* and Ustin defended in kind. The prince hit him three more times, all killing strikes. Ustin decided to change his tactics. When the prince came in for the fifth time, Ustin defended with *Aldfen* and was able to riposte. The prince easily parried and took the offensive back immediately. Ustin switched between *Pektong* and *Aldfen* defenses until he saw an opportunity to strike. He took it, but it was a trap. His sword flew from his hand, and the prince's sword stopped at his neck. The prince took a step back and waited for Ustin to retrieve his sword. Practice lasted three more hours. That night, Ustin ate well and slept hard. In the morning his saddle sores were the least of his pains. The next two days were just as quiet with only the occasional whiny or snort and the second night's clash of swords which he could still feel.

The sun was almost touching the tops of trees on this third day on the road, but the prince showed no signs of slowing. Ustin matched his mare's gait to the prince's horse and could see that the Tiger of Kelkaam wore the same expressionless mask he had worn for three days. The prince had only eaten when he had seen Ustin eating in the saddle, as if the man needed a reminder of bodily concerns that only a teenage boy could provide. But Ustin had not dared stop his horse without the prince's say, so he had held his bladder almost to bursting until the prince finally signalled a halt with one raised arm and unhorsed. When the man began to water a tree, Ustin did likewise.

Ustin's father, Insek, loved Prince Endegar. Ustin had yet to figure out why. The prince ignored Ustin, and he was sure the prince must wonder at the mistake of bringing a mere boy with him on this journey. Ustin wondered himself. But the prince had insisted Ustin travel with him. He had spoken of Ustin like a possession and promoted him to a full guard member before his sixteenth birthday. Over a year premature, and two seasons earlier than Ustin had ever heard tell. His father had made the guard half a year early after being the grand master's personal messenger. Ustin had been thrilled to follow in his father's stride the night Grand Master Elias asked him to wear the green cloak on his first run. Now Ustin had been promoted to guardsman and followed his prince with no clear duties of his own. He was the picture of his master.

They rode south while the sun went from blinding Ustin's left eye and burning his cheek to the soft glow of dusk that bathed the world in a bruised light of blue with black shadows. Prince Endegar dismounted and walked his horse into the woods to the west. When travelling outside the jungle, *Fenpela* always camped on the opposite side of a pathway from the nearest water source. This thanks to the curse on the land that began the sixth age almost two thousand years ago—or so said the prophet. But this evening Endegar walked into woods to the west toward the river. Ustin dismounted and followed his silent commander.

When the prince stopped in a small clearing, Ustin tied his horse and immediately began gathering fire wood. In his periphery he could see the prince encircling a bundle of kindling with rocks and flinging sparks onto in with steel and stone. When Ustin felt he had a night's worth of wood, he set it next to the fire and went back to his horse to brush down the mare and collect his bedroll. By the time he finished setting out his things, he

could smell boar grease. Not likely, he thought. No one brings raw meat on a trip. They hunt. But the prince was not a tracker, per se. Maybe he was not much of a hunter. Maybe he had grown soft living in the castle of an outside lord. Ustin shook his head at the thought. He would not think like an *Ongyofen*, always second guessing the succession in the name of tradition, as if the succession itself wasn't at the heart of all of the fen's traditions. When he looked in the pan the prince had set over the fire it contained eggs. Lots of eggs. Ustin stared at the eggs and thought about the last few days in silence. Silence. Ustin was sure even his father had never gone three days without speaking—at least not in the presence of another human being. But Prince Endegar had not made a peep, and Ustin felt it was inappropriate for him to address the prince in his sorrows until the prince addressed him first. So Ustin had ridden in silence, not asking for so much as a break to piss. He had eaten in the saddle without so much as a word. He had even tried to chew more quietly than normal. But after three full days of silence and here in the woods with eggs fried in grease as if his mother herself had taught the prince how to make a boy's stomach rumble, Ustin could take it no longer. They would be together for a week at least, and Ustin was not about to take a vow of silence just because the prince was upset over his wife leaving. At least the man had not been attacked by her like Ustin had. Ustin would have to speak at some point. But he did not know when the right moment would be to break the safe monotony of remaining unnoticed by such a dangerous creature as the Tiger of Kelkaam.

The next day the prince was silent still. Ustin watched him all morning. Like a mirror, Ustin copied his every move. When the prince rolled his bed, Ustin did the same. When he put away his provisions, Ustin put away his own. But Ustin was the first to grab some

dry rations from his pack and begin eating as he walked his horse back out to the road. In this the prince was led by the guardsman. They walked their mounts further into the woods away from the road until the forest thinned and they broke out onto a plain. Huge mountains loomed in the west. Hours later they stood across a great chasm from those mountains. The river that carried all of the waters of the fen to the ocean flowed thousands of feet below like a black string left haphazardly on the floor. The terrain had started sloping up again, and Ustin was sure they were even higher than the pillar. Not that it mattered. The pillar was far to the north and out of sight. In fact, the jungle was out of sight. They had passed the southern border of anything familiar to Ustin. Now they stood across from the eastern side of The Wedge, the great mountain range of Weltapero that spanned from the western shores to this place. They were too high to hear the water below, but the chirps of cliff swallows echoed up the walls. The river flowed toward them from the north and turned far beneath them to the west before it disappeared around a bend. The prince pulled out some rations from his pack and ate, so Ustin did the same. Then they sat and stared at the black strip of water.

Half an hour after eating, Ustin stood up to practice the sword. The prince continued watching the river. Ustin took off his shirt which already had days of grime in it. He wanted to get used to his father's gift. The sword had hung benignly from his side since his father had given it to him. It felt different than the practice swords; smoother; better balanced. He worked his way through *perpleg* and tried to keep the same pace that Arms Master Sylva made him move. Once he made it through the first engagements five times, he did them again, circling an imaginary opponent. Then he moved on to the second engagements. He kept an eye on the prince in his peripheral vision, but the man never

moved. A few times he was sure the prince had been watching him, but when he looked straight at the man, the prince was staring down at the river. Once Ustin had finished all ten engagements, he replaced his sword in the falcoln-headed scabbard. He left his shirt off until he was dry.

Suddenly the prince moved. He drew the huge scimitar hanging from his back, and Ustin half drew his own sword in case the man were about to attack him. But the prince held his blade parallel to his chest and began to tilt it up and down in front of him. Ustin looked toward the river and saw a red speck floating toward them. When the prince stopped moving his sword, tiny flashes came off of the speck. A boat, Ustin realized. He's flash signalling with the boat. When the tiny flashes stopped, Prince Endegar moved his sword several more times. When he was done signalling to the boat, the prince stood and sheathed his great scimitar.

Without a word the man took the reins of his horse and started walking south and east. Ustin followed him back towards the whispers and stares of foreign trees.

CHAPTER 11

CONFRONTATIONS

At midday the prince held up his arm in a signal to stop. He dismounted and rummaged through his pack for some lunchtime rations. Then he left his horse on the side of the road to forage while he continued down the road on foot. Ustin ate as well, but he wondered if he should stay with the horses. His arse hurt from a day and a half of riding, and he was content to stand for a while. Perhaps he's just scouting out the path ahead, Ustin thought, surely he doesn't mean for the horses to catch up to us on their own when they're done eating. The prince got far enough ahead that Ustin could no longer see him. Two birch trees watched him from across the ancient road. Still he stayed with the horses wondering how long the prince would be gone. After a while Ustin began to worry that he had been abandoned by the prince. Not that he was too worried. He had two horses and enough provisions to last him eight days. He was sure he could make his way back to the cliff road if he really had to. Then from far off he heard a whistle. The horses lifted their heads and galloped down the road.

"*Skiit!*" cried Ustin and began running after them. They were out of site in moments, but he kept going. He was reminded of all the training routines he had been forced through in his education: running up and down the pillar road between the levels of

Kelkaam until eventually he and the rest of the kids his age had to run all the way from the jungle floor to the top. A year later they had to run all the way down and then back up. The training was to prepare them for their required two years of service in the military, the first year of which they would be messengers. What it had not prepared him for was being abandoned by his commander on a broken road in a foreign land. The feeling of being watched crept up the back of his neck.

Ustin measured out in his mind how long the prince had been gone and thus how far ahead he likely was. Ustin did not need to catch up to him all at once, but also did not want to be in trouble for slowing them down. He decided on a fast jog, but before he got far, a man in a blue cloak stepped out from the trees ahead of him holding a loaded crossbow. Ustin took two steps toward the trees before the man cried, "Halt!"

Ustin stopped in a defensive crouch and looked at the man.

"I'm sorry to draw on you," the man said. "But we are far from civilization and I must question you while I have the chance."

Panic, loss, and regret flashed through his mind. Would he ever fall prey to another of Aavø's sneak attacks or hear her giggle when he pinned her to the divan and tickled her senseless? He could smell his mother's fowl in the other room; imagined one of his father's rare smiles at seeing his wife after six weeks of duty on the jungle floor; and felt the Peregrine tussling his hair before sitting down to dinner. He wanted to go back in time and say "yes" to every offer of play and camaraderie made outside of the practice ring. It would have been nice to have had friends in addition to peers. Why had he stayed so focused on training? He had told himself it was because he was younger. That had not mattered to them: not to some. Three years of smothered lust forced its way to the front

of his mind. Why had he not at least kissed Elsa when she had asked him too? He was going to die a fifteen-year-old guardsman who had not seen a single battle or breast. And he would do it without a fight: just the twang of the crossbow string and a bolt to the chest. Is this what cowardice feels like, he wondered. He put a brave face on it. "Alright then. What answers would you have from me at bow point?"

"Who are you?"

Ustin reasoned through his fear. Rely on your training, he thought. He had not been told what to say in this type of situation. His training had dealt with how to react to *Wogwen* on the jungle floor. But this man was not an intruder to the fen. The two of them stood in unclaimed wilderness. They stood leagues away from the river, and no permanent developments had existed in this land since the Fifth Age. Should he lie to the man about who he was and where he was from? That seemed ridiculous given the prince's seal that held his cloak together at the neck. He took a step sideways as he answered, "I am Ustin, son of Insek, Guardian of the *Fenpela*."

"Who is your companion?"

The man had been standing there for a while. Why had he let the prince pass? Because a fox does not question a tiger, thought Ustin, and this man is no more than a fox. Ustin decided to lie while taking another step sideways. "He is my father. A tracker from the fen."

"You lie," the man pronounced calmly. "Your trackers do not wear metal armor."

How did this man know such a thing? Ustin felt out matched in every way. The man held a crossbow he could discharge before Ustin would have time to draw a weapon. And the man knew more about the fen than Ustin knew about the man. The man wore a blue

cloak with no markings. Blue was the color of Gabholo? Ustin decided to speak in partial truths to see if it would be more convincing. With another step to the side Ustin said, “He is my commander.”

“If you take one more step toward the trees I’ll shoot you in the leg and question you the hard way.” The man said. Ustin froze, and his pulse quickened. The man continued, “What is your commander’s name?”

“Lieutenant Uundegar.” It was a lame lie, but his will to live overshadowed his imagination. Besides, Ustin had never been a good liar. He only changed the prince’s name enough that an outsider would not recognize it as one of the royal line.

The man stood silent. Ustin realized his lie had not worked. It had been close enough to the truth for the fox to see through it. His heart started pounding as his instincts acknowledged the man’s next move before Ustin’s consciousness did. Ustin bolted for the trees and felt a tug on his cloak before he entered the woods. The man had fired the crossbow and the bolt tore through Ustin’s cloak. If the man reloaded, Ustin would become a hunter’s prey. He drew his sword and ran at the man from out of the woods. The man had his foot in the crossbow pulling back on the string. When he saw Ustin charging, he stood upright and drew a sabre from the sheath at his belt. Ustin came in strong on the offense to try and get the man off balance. At least the trained part of his mind thought that. But there was another part of his mind that Ustin had never known existed. It was the animal part. Training had not prepared him for the combination of fear and exhilaration he now felt. He was not fighting to win as he always had, he was fighting to live.

The man was better with a blade than he had been with the crossbow. Ustin backed him up for a while, but the man got his footing and was able to take the offense away. Ustin circled as he defended so that he stood between the man and the direction Prince Endegar had gone. If he had to run, he could. His heart pounded as it never had in the practice ring. Animal instinct tried to take over. Rely on your training, he reminded himself. The trained part of Ustin's mind knew he was evenly matched with this man in *Pektong*. The battle could last a long time unless he took another tact.

Ustin made an aggressive play to take back the offense. Once he had the man backing up again, he switched from *Pektong* to *Aldfen*. The man was parrying fast, but had no power to riposte. Ustin attacked more aggressively, and the fox looked as though he were cornered by a dozen hounds. Ustin fought with his father's gift. It was a sharp blade that had likely killed many. It was time to strike. But Ustin had never killed, and here in the middle of an abandoned road amongst the watchful trees he realized he had no desire to kill. He had trained eight years for a moment just like this one. He had performed countless killing strikes on his peers with blunted blades, headless spears, wooden knives, and controlled hand-to-hand combat. The man in front of him was trying to kill him. He would have succeeded had he been a better shot with a crossbow. But now that Ustin had gained control over the situation, his heart slowed to the measured pace of the practice ring, and his animal instincts retreated even as the smell of fear exuded from his opponent. There were no arms masters or mentors here to tell him what to do; no peers to encourage him to go for the kill. All who lived on this small stretch of road were under his power, and he was more afraid of that power than he had been of dying.

Ustin made a decision. He left a false opening for the man to riposte. The man took it. Ustin parried and slashed as he had been trained to do, but instead of taking off the man's head, Ustin hit the man's shoulder. The sabre clattered to the ground. Ustin broke the man's nose with his off hand and swept his legs. The man fell on his injured arm and yelled out a loud curse before rolling onto his back in pain and clutching his bloody shoulder.

“Unbuckle your belt and take off your boots,” Ustin ordered as he kicked the sabre out of reach. Bolts to the crossbow and assorted knives clung to the belt, and Ustin had no doubt at least one or two more knives hid in the boots. The man released his injury to obey Ustin's command. Ustin was glad to see the wound would not prove lethal as long as the man kept it free of infection. He was able to remove his belt without help. “Toss it toward your sword.”

The man did as he was told. Ustin moved to stand between the man and his discarded weaponry while the man struggled with his boots. Ustin stood just within sword's reach. The man tossed the boots aside as well. He was sitting up in the middle of the road, holding his shoulder again. Ustin commanded him to stay put while he gathered up the belt and boots with his free hand. Ustin then backed away from the man toward the discarded crossbow. He dropped the man's affects in a pile and ordered the man one last time. “I have no intention of killing you, but you mustn't follow me either. Stand up. Good. Now, start walking north until I can't see you.”

The man started walking down the ancient road in his stocking feet. When he was well down the path, Ustin sheathed his sword and loaded the crossbow. The man kept walking. Ustin set the crossbow on the ground and buckled the man's belt above is own.

He sheathed the sabre, checked the boots for knives, which he found, threw the boots in the woods, and picked the crossbow up again. He walked backwards until the man was out of sight. Then he held the taut crossbow in one hand, the bolt in the other, and he ran.

Before his diversion, Ustin had paced himself to catch up to Prince Endegar in an hour based on how long the prince had been gone. Now he ran as fast as he could. The swords on either side of his hips banged against his thighs. He imagined flying face first into this forsaken road when one of them caught in his legs. There was naught to be done about it. He wasn't willing to leave anything behind, but he could not hold them by the pommels with the crossbow in one hand and the bolt in the other. Encumbered as he was, he wished more than ever that the prince had not called the horses. The thought of the man made his heart pound a little harder, so he concentrated instead on the number of birch trees he passed. He still felt watched. Perhaps it was the nature of travelling a foreign land for the first time. After a league of running, another figure came out in front of him. Ustin stopped, placed the bolt on the crossbow, and raised it to his shoulder. The figure held up its hands and stood very still. It was a ways down the road standing next to the woods, but he could see it wore a textured, cream-colored clothing. Ustin knew the figure could easily dodge his bolt from this range, but he had no intention of shooting unless compelled. He walked forward and sideways toward the opposite side of the road. He did not want to be delayed any further nor forced to hurt anyone else.

“You should have killed that man back there.”

“You saw that?” Ustin had not noticed from a hundred paces the figure was a woman. Her clothing was form fitting: as if it had been painted on. It's amazing Elsa ever spoke to such an oblivious sod outside the ring, he thought.

“He is telling his unit about you and the prince even now.”

The mention of the prince made Ustin stiffen. He barked at the woman. “How do you know Prince Endegar? Did you see him pass before you followed me?”

“I have watched you both since you left the fen.”

“Impossible. How could you keep up with us from the cover of the woods all this time?”

Across the road from her now he saw the details of her figure framed as they were by the shadows of the woods behind her. She did not wear form-fitting clothes of a creamy texture. She was naked. Both the design and color of her skin were that of a freshly timbered log with a smooth finished. Her skin, her eyes, even her teeth and tongue were like animated wood. “Your prince is up ahead. You should reach him in another league.”

“You’re a *deruspend* aren’t you?” Ustin had passed her now. He walked backward keeping the bolt trained on the strange creature.

“You must hurry if you do not wish to fight five men instead of just one.” She stepped back into the woods.

“Ustin?”

Ustin spun around still holding the crossbow to his shoulder. Prince Endegar froze in the saddle of his great, black mount and Ustin growled. He spun back around toward the trees, but the *deruspend* was gone. He disarmed the crossbow and turned back to the prince who had now relaxed. “Did you see her?”

“Who?”

“The *deruspend*. She was right there.” Ustin could feel his voice rising. “She stepped into the woods just before you spoke my name.”

The prince drew his sword. “Are you sure?”

“We spoke. She warned me of the men who are coming for us.”

“What men?” He sat up straighter in his saddle and moved his mount around Ustin’s position. “Where have you been and how did you end up with a crossbow and sabre?”

“I ran into some trouble back there, not that you would care.”

The prince’s face contorted this way and that as he hid any semblance of emotion. Ustin was too angry to be relieved that the prince felt emotions. Instead he glared at his commander until the man spoke, “Mount up. You will tell me everything as we ride.”

Ustin obeyed and the two of them set off north at a canter. “After you so cleverly called the horses to you, a man stepped out of the woods in front of me holding this crossbow,” Ustin shook the weapon in his hand, “cocked and loaded and pointing at my chest. He asked me who I was, who you were, and then he shot at me.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Before he shot at me?” Ustin held up the tear in his cloak. He felt a lesser version of his animal instincts rising up ready to fight again. “I told him who I was. I told him you were my father, which he didn’t believe, so I told him you were Lieutenant Uundegar, which he also didn’t believe. Then he shot at me!”

“How did you escape?” Only the slightest touch of staccato in the prince’s voice suggested he might be concerned.

Ustin told the prince about his battle trying hard to find that dispassionate tone that messengers were taught to use when reporting. He could still feel the heat in his voice, but the prince listened without reprimanding him for the subordination. Until the end.

“You left him alive?” The prince stared at him.

Ustin could see the man was more angry than surprised. Ustin's own anger protected him from being cowed, but behind his indignation he could feel a tinge of nausea. He wished he had been better trained to deal with people and not just weapons. "Yes."

"Why?"

"He was defeated. On his back with a lame sword arm."

The prince kept staring. The answer had not sufficed.

"I didn't want to kill an unarmed opponent in cold blood."

"The whole point of disarming an opponent is to make it easier to kill him. He tried to kill you, and now he is alerting his unit to our existence."

"Yes," Ustin shot out, "so I heard from the *deruspend* while trying to catch up to my liege who had both horses and a head start!"

The prince kept his quiet reserve. "What is the first rule of travel?"

"Stay with the unit unless ordered otherwise."

"So why didn't you follow me?"

"And leave the horses behind?" Ustin could hear the prince's next point in his mind before he had finished making his own.

"The horses did not require your attention, but you required mine. Had you been with me, the man would not have approached us alone."

Ustin was too angry to let it go, "No, but he would've gone back to report our presence, and we wouldn't even know anyone was after us."

"No one would know we exist if you'd killed him when you had the chance."

Ustin started his next point before the prince had finished speaking. “And I’m supposed to know that the Tiger of Kelkaam can whistle for his mounts? I don’t suppose you could have mentioned that at some point during the last four days of pure silence!”

“You weren’t exactly talkative yourself!” Prince Endegar roared at Ustin. “If you’re not confident in your duties, then speak up and ask a question. It is not my practice to assume my men are incompetent.”

Ustin leaned into the prince’s anger as if he were fighting a strong wind. “But it is your practice to take fifteen-year-old boys out of the fen the day after they’re pinned!”

“My mistake.” The prince clenched his teeth the way he had when his father spoke to him. Ustin thought the man might hit him, but he took a deep breath instead. Then Prince Endegar muttered, “I thought Insek’s son would be better prepared for this.”

The statement knocked the words out of Ustin.

CHAPTER 12

EITHER OAR

An hour after puncturing her heart she awoke whole. The drop from the cliff had freed her of all the scars and stretch marks. Now she was free of every nick and scratch she had earned the day before, including the hole in her chest. The dagger she had used lay next to her, the blood that should be on it had been dissolved in the renewal process though a few drops had dried on the sand. Best of all, she felt as if she had slept a full night when only an hour had passed. The boat men will have set a watch, she thought, but most of them will be sleeping. She should be able to move around them in the dark without too much difficulty.

She rinsed out her underclothes in the river before dressing again in the outfit she had been wearing for days now. She had forgotten how disgusting the average life was. There is no way around it, she thought, until I am home. She launched the boat into the dark and rowed as hard as she could. She wanted to be as far from shore as she could get before passing the boat men. They would not expect her to keep moving alone through the night, but she would no longer take the river's current for granted. Now she would put her new body's muscles to the test and row as hard and as long as she could. By the time she passed the river ship she was well out of range for their lights to catch her. Once she

could no longer see the faintest sign of their existence, she moved to the prow of her little craft and lit the ingenious lantern that had been there all along. The casing had a reflective material on the back side so that the light flooded more powerfully in one direction. She could see much further ahead than she had been able to see with the torches she had mounted to the prow on the nights before. How advanced these islanders are, she thought, I will be sure to rub these discoveries in Falk's nose next time I see him.

The night was long and strenuous. It had been centuries since she had worked so hard; there had been no need. She was glad, at least for now, that she had found herself in such a strong body. Cliff swallows began chirping before the sky had noticeably lightened to her own eyes. She wondered how long it would take the boat men to figure out she had gone on without them. More importantly, she wondered how long it would take them to catch up.

She rowed all night and all day, renewed herself in the evening, and then carried on rowing. Yet the captain and his crew caught up to her in the middle of that next night. This time they stayed a little ways back and kept pace without sidling up next to her. They are too fast to lose, she thought. She stopped rowing and merely guided her vessel by the rudder through the night.

After several days of cat and mouse with the larger river boat, she could see the eastern cliff to her left start to shrink. It was still much higher than it had been in the jungle area, but it steadily declined. I must be getting somewhere, she thought, but where? The continents of Kwel were very flat. She had never imagined cliffs like these. The mountains to the west were larger than anything she had ever seen or heard of. And this island was bigger than any Woorin had ever mapped, and she was sure the little man

had mapped them all. The information minister was very finicky about his maps. It was how he had come to be known as The Cartographer. Of course, his secrets and spycraft were how he had come to be known as The Worm. But he had too much pride in his knowledge to give her a false map. Here and now without any map, she could only hope the diminishing cliff meant she was closer to the ocean. For now she just wanted to be rid of the river boat, and spent the rest of the day planning just how to do that.

That night she did not bother to renew herself. She needed a perfect pair sandbars for her plan to work. When she found the pair, she would stop in the clear light of day. The captain could not suspect. He had no way of knowing who or what she was. He must think that she was sleeping on her boat in the current or else surviving on only an hour a night. Either way, he would not be surprised when she stopped to sleep after all this time. So she rowed through the night, predicting that he would continue to watch her as long as he knew she was awake. The larger boat closed in as it grew dark to keep her in range of the lantern light. Just as she had hoped.

After a full day and a half of rowing, Devika was glad to see the hints of morning as the stars faded into a lightening sky. It was not until after the sun had passed by that crack of sky that she found what she had been looking for: two beaches close together; one small enough that only she could land, and one big enough for the larger ship to land. After days and nights of these men respecting her space it was clear that they would not take her by force, even in her sleep. But she still would not risk discovery by renewing herself with the other boat so close. Instead, she beached her craft and slept for the first time in years.

She awoke in the late afternoon. Men laughed from around a corner of canyon and Devika could smell roasting meat and garlic mixed with cook fire. Her stomach growled and she smiled. It had been a long time since she had eaten anything other than rations from the boat, but she could wait to stuff herself after she knew her Desna's fate. The smells and laughter brought back ancient memories of armies and companions who had enjoyed each other's company as long as they could around jovial flames. The monotony of marching across unknown continents had felt almost leisurely once camp had been made and fires built. The wonders of the world had opened up before her as she rode with an army at her back. Stews had waited for stories of battles, valor, and love to finish feeding the souls of all who listened before interrupting with the mortal need for nourishment. And every day a new stanza had been written in the epic of a group that would one day rule every land they discovered. Every tree unknown to their homeland, every animal that had not existed on Pergee, and every peoples they came across would live, procreate, and die within the empire they expanded. Even eating had been enjoyable back then.

Devika ate enough rations to give her the energy she would need for her task. Then she made her preparations. She had two lengths of rope in her little boat and hoped they would be enough. She beached her craft completely and placed some large rocks in front of it to hold it steady. After stripping down to her small clothes and a belt, she tied the end of both lengths of rope around her waist. She tied the opposite end of one rope to the front of her boat. The other rope she kept wrapped up in her hand. She wrapped a scarf she had taken from the field marshal's bedroom around her head, tucking her hair inside. Then she waded into the water as quietly as she could.

The current was strong and she found herself fighting it. Her feet dug into the sand, but she slid down stream faster than she wanted. As soon as she found a stone to help her control her pace, it rolled over under the weight of her in the current. She smashed her toe against the next rock she tried to slow herself down with. The toe would have broken had such a thing been possible. Instead, the unyielding bones and ligaments held fast to each other as the rock scraped away the skin. Immersing herself in the river, she let herself go in the current hoping that her other preparations would hold her better than the rocks beneath the river had.

The rope pulled taut at her waist, forcing the last of the air from her lungs. She floated to the top of the river and breathed deep, not daring to move more than that until she could see where she was and who else was there. When she opened her eyes, she could see the back of the larger boat just past her feet and the glow of the boatmen's cook fire lighting the canyon wall. She had to grip her rope with both hands to pull herself upright in the current. No one was looking her way. Why would they? A burst of laughter erupted around the fire and echoed off of the stone. If they keep this up, they will never hear me, she thought.

Her plan had been to loop her extra rope around the back of the ship and pull herself up to the deck. She could see now that would have been next to impossible. There was nothing to loop it around on the stern. But another way presented itself. Two anchors held the back of the boat in place even as the front end was beached. If she could reach one of their lines, she could climb aboard that way. Instead of looping the boat, she would loop the nearest anchor line. She kept herself upright in the current with only one hand on the rope that kept her in place. With her free hand, she threw the other rope as hard as she

could beyond the anchor. The current forced the bulk of her second rope down the river until it was dangling sideways in the water on the opposite side of the anchor line.

She would have to cut the rope tying her to her own boat if she was going to reach the anchor line. This frightened her, but she was confident it would work. She reached for her belt that held the small hand axe and every knife she had found amongst her provisions. With the first knife she felt, she cut the line and was pulled under the current. When she resurfaced she could see the back of the boat coming up fast. She only had to maneuver a little to make sure she hit the back straight on. If she hit the boat anywhere but the back, the current would drag her under the curve of the hull.

The back of the boat was easier to hit than she had thought, but it was just as curved as the sides and she began to go down anyway. She used every limb to find leverage and keep from going under the hull, but the ship was tightly built and gave her nothing to hold onto. Her body was flattened against the wood now and she could feel her small clothes dragging in the current like a sail designed to sink ships. It will be a rough trip down river without a boat, she thought, but I will make it eventually. Just as she was about to stop struggling and let herself go under, her feet found the rudder. She pushed herself above water and was able to hold fast to the ship now that her legs had leverage against the current.

The rope she had thrown around the anchor line floated a body's length out of reach. She would have to jump for it. Keeping one foot on the rudder, she placed the other one on the side of the boat and kicked out as hard as she could. The splash she made was louder than she had hoped, but with the rope in hand and she let the current drag her under for as long as she could hold her breath. She surfaced just long enough to take a

breath and then pulled on the rope against the current. She continued doing this in a pattern until the rope was taut above her hanging from the anchor chain. After tying a loop in the rope, she put her foot in and pulled herself up to the chain. Then she wrapped her legs around the chain and shimmied toward the boat. Out of breath with her bloodied toe throbbing and her heart still pounding from a near brush with an unplanned death, she wondered if this would be worth it.

At the top of the chain, she held to the railing at the stern of the ship and dragged herself aboard. As soon as she flopped onto the deck in her drenched small clothes, she heard footsteps running up to meet her.

“Captain!” Yelled a boatman as he drew his sword. “The field marshal is on board! Field marshal on board!”

Another man guarding the bow came running to the aid of his comrade. The captain’s voice cried out from the beach, “Stand down, you two! Stand down!”

The man running across the deck slowed to a halt. The first man looked confused as he reached her with his sword out. She rolled into a kneeling position with one foot beneath her. The man held his sword between them. The captain’s voice came roaring up again from the beach, “Corporal, I said stand down!”

The man was young. Almost as young as the boy she had left unconscious in the jungle. He knows I am dangerous, she thought, smart man. She spoke to him calmly, without trying to hide her accent. “I have no quarrel with you, young soldier. Step back and let me pass.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Your captain ordered you to stand down,” she said. “Why not let me work that out with him?”

“Grand Master Elias ordered you back to Kelkaam. Why are you running?”

“Captain?” She called out to the officer on the beach as softly as she could and still be heard. She did not want to startle the corporal. She never took her eyes off of his. “He is not standing down.”

“Corporal,” called the captain. “That’s enough.”

The corporal glanced at the captain. Devika bumped the flat of the sword away from her, lunged at the man, and punched him in the throat. He dropped the sword and grabbed his neck. Devika took a knife from her belt. The man went for her wrist with one hand but she grabbed his wrist first with her empty hand, wrapped it behind his back and held the knife to his sore throat. She faced the young soldier toward his companion who now had his sword out.

“Captain,” she called once more. “Ask this other man to get off of the boat. If he does, and no one else boards until after I have left, this man will live.”

“Come off the boat now, Ulric,” the captain ordered.

The other man stepped backward toward the plank without sheathing his sword. When he found the plank leading to the beach, he walked down it with the bravest show of calm arrogance he could muster. Devika respected that, but now had a hostage who had already proven troublesome.

“What is it you want from the boat, Field Marshal?” The captain asked.

“I am not willing to tell you, but I will say my patience is gone. I will secure this man mid-ship and then pull up the plank. If I detect anyone trying to come aboard before I

have left, I will slit his throat and kill anyone else who comes near enough. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Field Marshal," stated the captain. "No one will attempt to board."

Devika nodded to the captain, and then yanked on the arm she had pinned behind the young soldier's back. He let out a gasp of pain. She dropped her knife and pulled him down to the deck so his face was on the floor. She knelt on the wrist behind his back and untied the rope at her waist. Then she pulled his other arm roughly behind him and tied his hands together. When she was done, she pulled him to his knees, told him to put a foot under him, and then pulled him to his feet so the captain could see she had not killed him while they had been out of sight. She ordered him to the mast and warned him not to run. He listened to her better than he had listened to his captain. She used the longer rope that still hung mostly in the water to tie him face first to the mast. Then she retrieved the plank. Captain and crew made no sound as they watched from the beach.

She lost respect for these people as the moments went by. Their superior construction of homes, boats, and weapons did not prevent them from choosing the weaker path in strategy. They could have taken her by force any time they had chosen these past several days. Even now they could have rushed the plank, sacrificing one man for their prey. Instead, they stood silently watching her do as she pleased on their craft. Granted, she thought, they think I am their precious Field Marshal Sylva. She knew how precious Desna was to her, but doubted anyone else would defend Desna as ferociously as she did. Here she had an entire crew unwilling to detain her for fear of ... well, she did not fully understand what they feared. The woman they thought they were chasing was running away from her duties against the direct orders of her liege. Devika would have had this

woman killed on sight, even if she were married to one of her sons. She tried to remember if she had ever had to make such a choice. Likely, but it did not matter this moment.

Once the plank was up, she looked around the bow. Nothing that could be what she was looking for was there. She returned to the young soldier. “Do you have lighting stones with you?”

“Go die, you foreign bitch.”

So, not everyone had the same respect for this woman as the captain did. She untied the scarf around her head and gagged the man. “Captain! Where would this man’s lighting stones be?”

“Lighting stones?” She heard the captain ask his men.

“She must mean flint and steel,” answered one of the sailors.

The captain called back to her, “In his belt pouch.

She cut the pouch with another knife and headed back to the railing where she lit two of the lanterns while the captain and crew looked on. She dropped the pouch on the deck and carried one of the lanterns down the steps to the rowers’ level to inspect the area under the bow. In the floor was a locked hatch. With her hatchet she chopped the wood around the lock until she could break it free. Beneath the hatch was what she had hoped to find: barrels of oil. She would not be able to maneuver them the way she would have liked. Instead, she took the lantern back up top, cracked the lids to the barrels below, and started dipping every loose piece of rope, canvas, cloth, and wood available and spreading the oil-soaked items around the oar deck. When she was done, she went back topside and unfurled the mast. She threw one lantern down the stairs toward the oil-

soaked oar deck, cut the ropes tying the corporal to the mast, pushed him aside, and broke the other lamp on the wood where the man's head had been.

She ran to the stern and jumped as far as she could off the back of the ship toward the rope that still dangled in the current from her own small craft up stream.

CHAPTER 13

FIRST BLOOD

Ustin wondered why they were headed north. He wondered if they would run into the five men who the *deruspend* said were after them. He wondered if Prince Endegar meant to take them on by himself. He wondered if the prince would then take Ustin back to the fen, strip him of his rank, discharge him from the guard forever, and relegate him to gathering fruit on the forest floor until he was too old to work. Ustin did not ask a single question. He had no words.

Instead he watched, guessed, inferred, and followed. For the first several sands following was the only thing to do. The prince had used up the last of his own words insulting Ustin as deeply as the young man thought possible. The Grand Master of Kelkaam, the prince's own father, had told Ustin's father that the boy was becoming a fine young man. His father had replied, "The best of men." Ustin had carried that with him on the grand master's bidding and for the past several days in the wilderness with the prince. It was Ustin's arch of confidence, and the prince had loosened the stones. The horses carried them north.

Ustin's feeling of being watched had increased after his meeting with the *deruspend*, but it was an ambivalent sense instead of a malignant one now. It was obvious the

creature would not protect him physically, but someone was watching out for him. After a quarter hour, the prince dismounted at a bend in the road and lead his mare uphill into the woods. Ustin did likewise. Are we to hide from them closer than they would suspect?

Ustin wondered. The men might pass us by thinking we would be much further south by now. They tied their mounts well out of site from the road.

“Load the crossbow.”

The prince’s voice startled Ustin. The silence between them had been so firm that its breaking unsteadied the young man. He did as he was told. The prince strung a bow that had hung idle from his packs since they had left the jungle. Then the man unfastened his crimson cloak, laid it neatly over his saddle, and headed back toward the road. So it’s to be an ambush, thought Ustin. So much for hiding. Ustin walked two steps behind the prince with a loaded crossbow until the man turned his head and commanded, “Walk with me.”

Ustin walked next to him instead. The man’s tone had mutated from the anger of before to the patient voice of an arms master.

“We will position ourselves on either side of the bend—on the outside, so that we can see each other. Stay hidden from the road until you hear the horses. Then keep as much cover as you can, but watch for them. You will be positioned further north. When the last man is in view, shoot him—a kill shot as clean as you can make it. I will take the man in front. You know what to do after that?”

Ustin nodded and felt the hollowness expand inside his guts. The prince must have sensed it. He leaned in and took Ustin’s shoulder in his enormous left hand at the same time his voice hardened.

“These men are hunting us. A stag in the wild is a noble creature, but his antlers do not protect him from the weapons of men. If you wish to be a noble creature, you will end up with your head mounted on the hunter’s wall. There is only one way to save yourself from the hunter. You must hunt him back.”

The prince’s words filled some of the empty space Ustin felt, but not all. They crossed the road to be on the outside of the bend allowing them to be further apart and still within eye contact. Before splitting up, the prince spoke one last time. “This is what you have been training for these past eight years. You have sparred in rings and on terrains, learnt the use of all weapons including your own bare hands, specialized in the sword, run up and down that rock we call home dozens of times, sat through lecture after lecture of strategy with Master Abner, and here you are. Every mundane exercise, every drill, every lesson has brought you to this point. Every bruise your arms master gave you was a strike of the hammer against the anvil and you were the steel. Your homeland forged you for its protection. You are a weapon, and weapons are created to spill blood. You will spill blood this day.”

Ustin’s body felt heavier and heavier—like the empty space in his stomach had been filled with molten lead that circulated throughout his body. He only hoped that when it cooled he would still be able to move.

“Ustin.”

The prince had let go and they were headed to their posts when he turned again and spoke. Ustin faced him.

“The Peregrine was not so named because he flew away.”

The hot lead cooled instantly and Ustin froze. He nodded at the prince in hopes it would be enough to make the man turn around and keep walking while Ustin unparalyzed himself. The prince did turn. Ustin looked down at the falcon's head adorning the locket of his scabbard and reached down to touch it. It was lukewarm to the touch—the temperature of the spring day. He had hoped it would spark something in him—that it would transmute that leaden feeling into light. But it was mere decoration. It was metal that took on the heat or cold of its environment without thought or care. The metal had been forged into what it was and did not complain. The metal of his sword was only a tool in his hands, and he was a tool for Kelkaam, the grand master, the prince. But Ustin's temper alternated hot and cold like the two solstices fighting for control over the sphere of his mind. He experienced the conflict as nausea that warmed him enough to thaw and take his position in the woods.

Ustin sat against a tree and wondered how long it would be before the men came riding by. What if they didn't? He thought. Perhaps there is a hidden road—a shortcut they took to cut us off further south. Perhaps they lie in wait while we sit here lying in wait. The wait of two parties destined never to end. But it ended with the sound of hooves on the road. They were moving at a canter. Ustin had to hurry into position. The first man passed before Ustin was ready with his crossbow. The second passed as Ustin knelt down on last year's dead leaves. The third passed as Ustin raised the crossbow to his shoulder. Ustin sighted the fourth to gage their speed. When the fifth one came into view, he shot. Two men cried out and five horses reared. Ustin dropped the bow as he stood and drew his sword. He ran down to the road without a sound from his throat. Only dead leaves gave away his position. One of the men stepped his horse back away from forest. His

right arm hung in a sling. The spy, thought Ustin. The other two men drew swords and waited.

Prince Endegar got to the road first. Ustin was dimly aware of the prince charging straight at a man on horseback with his great scimitar in one hand and his immense round shield in the other. Ustin cleared the woods where another man on horseback waited. Ustin was able to move in on the man's off-hand side. The man turned the horse while trying to strike from across his mount's body. Ustin stepped just out of reach of the man's blade and made a two-handed swipe at the mounts head. The mare reflexively started to rear before its back legs went limp beneath it. The rider was skilled enough not to fall under the horse, but escaping the dying beast took his concentration away from Ustin. Ustin moved in while the man was off balance and swung hard. The man got his sword up in time, but it was knocked wide. Ustin thundered forward attacking in *Aldfen*. The man parried two more strikes before his openings were so large that Ustin drove his sword through the man's stomach. It went straight through to the hilt and the dying man's weight pulled on Ustin's blade. The sword did not slide out as easily. He had sliced into the ribs of the man's back, forcing the bones outward. Pulling his sword back out caused the ribs to close in around the blade and stick. Have I trained for this, Ustin asked himself. Yes. He lifted up his foot and kicked the man backwards while tugging on his sword. He had practiced on bales of hay dressed in chain mail when he was twelve. He stumbled a few steps back. The ribs had not held as fast for a fifteen year old as he remembered the chain-dressed bale of hay holding when he was twelve. Ustin barely registered the gasp from the man's lips as he tumbled backwards to the ground. Ustin's training had taken over. After knocking the bale down, you pierce its heart or cut off its

head. Arms Master Sylva called this second offense the “mercy strike.” Ustin could see why, looking at the man struggling for breath as he held the front side of his body and bled out of both sides. He had only the suffering part of this life left. It is still life, thought Ustin, so he imagined the empty helmet on the bale of hay as he raised his blade. Before striking he looked at the man again and stopped thinking of his training. It’s dishonest, he thought. This was not a bale of hay in a practice ring. He had to own what he was doing. This man would die at Ustin’s hands. And with that, he swung. He heard panting behind him. The man he had shot with his crossbow had also not died. The prince had already finished with two men and was pulling the injured spy out of his saddle. Ustin committed mercy on the man who had been shot through the lung by a crossbow bolt, and hurried over to the prince and spy.

Prince Endegar had the man on his back. The prince held his sword at the man’s throat and kept one foot at the man’s wounded shoulder. “Why did you attack us?”

The man shook his head. The prince stepped on his wound. The cursing that sputtered from the man’s lips was unintelligible. “You only attacked when you knew my name. Why?”

Ustin felt flush at the stupid name he had given for his prince. Perhaps he could have avoided this if he had been a better liar. Lying had to be less painful than killing. The man kicked at the prince’s sword arm. The prince parried with his sword cutting into the man’s knee. A new eruption of senseless curses spewed out of the man’s lips.

“You are from Gabholo. We are trading partners, not enemies. Why did you attack the future sovereign of your neighbor?”

The man rolled away from the prince's feet while yelling in pain and then tried to stand on his one good leg with support from his one good arm. The prince kicked the man's good arm out from under him and the spy hit the road with his uninjured shoulder. Now he moaned and tried to sit up, but Prince Endegar stopped him with his foot on the man's shoulder again. The man kicked with his other leg and was met again with the blade—this time on his shin. The spy cried out in pain. He rolled toward the prince's foot trying to remove it from his shoulder with his one good arm, but the prince was steady. The spy kicked again with his second leg. The prince smashed his knee with the pommel of his sword. The man use his last good limb to pull a knife from his belt. Instead of stabbing at the prince's leg, he tried to cut into his own chest. The prince cut off his hand.

“You will die when I have my information. Why have you started a war?”

“We defected. I only attacked to steal the boy's things.”

“Lie.” The Prince applied pressure to the man's closest knee. This time the man's face turned white and he passed out. The prince took the stroke of mercy and Ustin emptied his stomach on the road. Ignoring the sickness, Prince Endegar commanded, “We must hide these bodies.”

When the prince caught sight of the horse lying dead in the road he changed his mind. “Leave the body of the man whose horse you killed where it lies. Tie the other four to their own horses and bring the bodies and their mounts up to where we left ours.”

Prince Endegar began butchering the dead horse with a hunting knife he had pulled off one of the bodies. The whole thing was done in the pure light of spring with the sun just west of center sky, casting only the smallest shadows onto the open road. No clouds wept over the concrete battlefield. No mud splattered the scene, just the blood of five men

and a horse on what had recently been the dry ground of an ancient Imperial Road. Ustin finished his task about the same time the prince stood up with two horse steaks in his bloody hands and said, “We can no longer stay on the road. I will signal the river boat to meet us in Gabholo.”

With that the prince headed back into the woods. Ustin followed.

CHAPTER 14

A BED-TIME STORY

Ustin and the prince remained quiet the rest of the afternoon. Their first attempt at conversation had resulted in a bitter argument and the death of five scouts from Gabholo. Ustin had killed two of them himself. When they had emerged from the woods on the cliff side of the forest, the prince had started untying one of the corpses from its mount. Ustin followed suit. They tipped all four of them off of the horses and left them for carrion. They continued on after that, each of them leading two horses and the prince whistling for their native breeds when they wandered too far away. They made camp near the cliff across from the wedge. The prince fried the horse steaks in a pan over the coals. Ustin stared at the fire. Neither made a move toward the practice blades. The old irritable silence of the past few days had been replaced with a bitter one. When the steaks were done, the prince stabbed them both with knives and handed one to Ustin. The young guard took it and stared at it the way he had been staring at the fire moments before. The silence between the two men was a challenge—a gauntlet thrown down for either of them to pick up with a spoken word. The prince took it up.

“You’re even more quiet than your father.”

Ustin took the steak off of the knife and threw it across the fire. It smacked against the prince's mail. "Don't you ever speak to me of my father again!"

The prince's mouth opened in surprise. It was the first time Ustin had seen the man's stoic face change into something other than irritability or anger. He could flog Ustin then and there for subordination. The steak fell in his lap and he tossed it in the fire. Then he spoke again, "I suppose you're scared."

"Not of you." Ustin said with a conviction he lacked. He refused to reveal any weakness to this man.

"No?" The prince questioned. The man looked at Ustin with his predatory eyes. The Tiger sniffing out its prey. "Well, perhaps not. I wouldn't expect a coward to win his pin from my wife."

Another false assumption. "I never touched your wife." Ustin looked back at the fire when he realized how that had sounded.

The prince either did not notice or refused to acknowledge the turn of phrase. "Who did you earn your pin from?"

"Arms Master Artrond."

"I see."

Ustin felt the judgement of the short statement. You had to go to a lower ring to earn your pin, just like everyone else, Ustin imagined the prince thinking. "I had intended to win my pin from Arms Master Sylva. Arms Master Artrond goaded me into the ring with him before my last session with her. I beat him at first touch."

"A goading is beneath..." Prince Endegar stopped.

Judgement struck him again. Ustin started to think it would have been better to let the prince think him afraid. Perhaps the man would have taken the conversation in a different direction and spared Ustin the present humiliation. Prince Endegar did not approve of goadings. Or perhaps he just did not approve of those weak enough to react to them. Ustin had ignored goadings for years during his training. He thought they were a doltish part of the culture of Kelkaam, but his father had nodded at him that day. The Peregrine had beamed when it was over. Sylva had congratulated him formally and hugged him after presenting Artrond's pin to him. Ustin had not thought to feel ashamed of the action until now. If the prince knew what Artrond had said, maybe he would feel differently about it. But Ustin would not demean his arms master by repeating those words. Thinking about her made him angry at the prince again, and he wished he had another steak to throw.

“She was a natural with the sword, even when she was young.” Prince Endegar was staring at the fire.

The prince spoke of his wife as though he had read Ustin's mind. He must be worried about her, Ustin thought. That was why Ustin had remained silent for three days. He had not wanted to interrupt the grieving prince's thoughts. Not because he was scared. Not because he thought the prince had nothing to teach him. Ustin was intimidated, to be sure, but not to speechlessness. To prove this to himself, he asked, “Will you tell me about her?”

Prince Endegar did not acknowledge Ustin's question with any physical indications. He started into the fire as if it revealed the story he would have told regardless. “We met in Bayside. She was a scullery maid, and I was the foreigner sent to train in *Pektong* with

the islanders. All of the princes of Kelkaam have trained there since the prophet returned. You wouldn't know that. No one but the princes themselves have known that. But it doesn't matter anymore. I was the last to go. The end of a three-hundred-year-old tradition. Much older traditions are about to end, but that's a story you'll have to live through, so there's no point in my telling you now."

Ustin remembered the prince's words while arguing with the grand master. The grand master was disturbed over the assassination attempt that would have ended the ruling line of Kelkaam, but the prince disregarded the succession's import. The thought percolated to the back of his mind until it reached the pool of mysteries that Ustin kept as a place to wet his curiosity when time allowed. For now, Ustin listened.

"She was a scullery maid, but she never acted much like one. That's what I was getting at before I distracted myself. There's too much in my head that I haven't let breathe, so excuse my airing out. She was always clean—cleaner than the average scullery maid. She was cleaner than almost anyone I've ever known. She always found a way into water, and she always seemed to have soap with her. She's not from Bayside. She was as much a foreigner there as she is in Kelkaam. She was born in a place that doesn't exist, or shouldn't. Keller. The sunken continent. A myth. Even the prophet was convinced it was gone before he met Sylva, although he had always believed in its prior existence. He believes in The Six as well. Why not, I say. Believe in what you will. The man is over three hundred years old, so maybe he's one of them."

Endegar snorted without smiling. Does the man ever smile, thought Ustin. But he must. Earlier that day Ustin was sure the man never spoke, but here he was spilling out audible treasures.

“It wasn’t her lighter hair that gave her away on Bayside, though. They have all shades of hair. It was her eyes. They’re blue like ours, but no one on Bayside has blue eyes. All brown for as long as that people have lived there. They don’t even mix with other islanders. They are strange like us in that way.

“It wasn’t love at first site. She was too young, but she intrigued me: A scullery maid with a love of soaping herself like a dirty pot. But I didn’t find her more beautiful than any other girl. I was only there to learn about the outside world and train and make in-roads with the islanders of the east. I didn’t have time for the girls my own age much less a child from the kitchens. Then she showed up in my rooms. Oh, don’t look so perplexed. She was twelve, and I was twenty. I’m not a pervert. She had a knife. A short sword, really. It was beautiful. Bronze. From a much older age, but sharpened like it had just come from the weaponsmith. The hilt bore two bare torsos—identical females—one on either side of the blade, in detail so precise you’d have thought it made by The Artisan herself. Sylva had found it under water on the opposite side of the world. Now she intrigued me threefold. A soaped-up scullery maid holding a ceremonial weapon worth a nobleman’s fortune stood in my room, which had been securely locked.”

Ustin smiled while the prince kept the same serious expression and continued his story about a woman they both loved.

“How did you get in here?” Endegar asked.

“Never mind that,” the girl replied and shook her head slightly as if a stronger shake would collect too much dust in her perfect bun. As tight as she had pulled back her hair, it was still obvious how much curl she had. “Can you teach me to use this?”

“That’s not the right question.” Endegar inspected the lock on his door as he spoke to the young intruder. He tried his key which worked perfectly.

“That’s not an answer.”

“Yes.”

“Yes what.”

“‘Yes’ is the answer.” Satisfied with the lock, Endegar began to inspect the hinges on the door.

“You’ll teach me?”

“No.”

“But you just said ‘yes.’”

“I said ‘yes’ to the question you asked. But I also told you it wasn’t the right question.”

The girl’s hair shined by candlelight as she stood in her white nightclothes with her mouth open and silent. Too white, Endegar thought about her simple gown. She must wash it as carefully as she does herself.

“I don’t get it,” she said.

Endegar crossed the room to the window and inspected it the same as he had the door. The girl watched as he passed inches from her. She stood still: fearless. He explained as he tested the latch between the two panes, “You asked if I *can* teach you. Yes, I *can*. I am capable of teaching you. The appropriate question is *will* I teach you. To that, the answer is no.”

“What are you, six?” The girl had a sharp tongue.

Endegar looked at her. “What are you, ten?”

“I’m twelve.”

“You’re too young.”

“I heard you telling the yard that boys *and* girls in your land start learning at eight.”

“Fine. You’re too old. I still won’t teach you.” He approached her head on. “Now tell me how you got into my room.”

“But why?”

“So I can change the locks or door mounts or window casings or whatever,” Endegar replied.

“No, dummy, why won’t you teach me?”

“Because you’re rude.”

“I’m sorry I called you ‘dummy.’” She hung her head for a moment. Then lifted it up again and shot out, “But I wasn’t rude until after you said ‘no.’ Why did you say ‘no’ the first time?”

“It’s rude to break into someone’s room.”

The girl shrugged her tiny shoulders. “Well, locks have never been much of an obstacle for me.”

Endegar grunted. They were three feet apart. Endegar stood in his practice leathers, she in her simple maid’s night dress. Endegar assumed it was a maid’s night dress. He had never seen a woman in her night dress, but figured the ladies of Bayside court would not be caught in simple, white cotton even while sleeping. He imagined those haughty ladies slept in silk and lace next to their fish-breathed husbands. When Endegar finally moved toward her, she startled so badly she cut her finger on the blade of her sword. Recovering her wits, she held the small hilt with both hands, the blade pointing straight at

Endegar's chest. With one hand he knocked the sword aside by the flat of the blade. With his other hand he lifted her up by both of her wrists. He placed his empty arm behind her knees and carried her to the hallway. Once there, he stretched her out so that her arms went far beyond her head and squeezed her wrists until she squealed and let the sword clatter to the stone floor. Then he let go of her wrists so that her head hung just above the ground as he kept a grip on one of her knees; her other knee still draped his forearm.

“Lesson one: Never pull a weapon you don't know how to use on someone who does.”

She looked up at him with a face growing red from hanging upside down. “So you'll teach me?”

Endegar swung her back up, caught her under the arm, and let her legs drop to the floor. He waited for her to get her balance before putting his face down next to hers. Nose-to-nose he said, “No.” Then he pushed her backwards a few steps. Her hair fell out of its bun and around her face and shoulders.

She picked up the sword and casually called over her shoulder, “I'll just keep sneaking into your room until you agree.”

“Not without this you won't.” Endegar showed her the metal object that had been holding her bun in place. He knew it must be what she had used to pick his lock. She just smiled at him and ran off down the hallway. Endegar looked at the object she had left him with. He held a fork with one tine contorted this way and that cleverly enough for her to break through the locksmith's finest. Endegar shook his head and shut the door, barring it from the inside.

“That was the first time I spoke to her. She was the tiniest little twelve-year-old I’ve ever seen. I had no idea she’d be as tall as she is now—average for a *Fenpela* woman—but at twelve she was short even for an outsider. A lot of outsiders, at least on Bayside, are ready to be married at thirteen. Ready by their standards, anyway. Some of them marry men as old as I am now.” The prince grimaced. “Strange. But enough of that. Off to bed with you, silent one.”

There was no anger or bitterness in the prince’s command. Ustin had been in a yelling match with his commander earlier that day and thrown a horse steak at him over the dinner coals. Yet the man had not punished him for it. He only berates me for everything else, Ustin thought. He stayed awake in his bedroll trying to imagine Arms Master Sylva as a bratty little squirt hanging upside down from the prince’s arm. Her future husband. Neither of them had known that then, of course. Ustin thought about how she must have developed into a young woman of his age. What had she been like then? Beautiful, he knew. That would have been the year Ustin was born, but he tried to imagine what it would have been like to know her as a peer. Would they have practiced together in the ring? Served together in the guard? That is how his parents had met. They had grown up together from their early training on. Ustin had not trained with many girls and none that he noticed outside of a parry and a strike.

The moon waned, and Ustin watched more and more stars appear as the firelight dimmed.

CHAPTER 15

THE MASQUE

Pulling herself through the current back to her craft had exhausted her, but the sight of those men standing uselessly on the beach as their boat burned down to the water line made her smile. Over a week later her smile had faded completely. She had seen no sign of life, no sign of the ocean, and no sign that the canyon she floated down would ever end. Almost two weeks had passed since she had woken up in this foreign body. So it had taken at least two weeks to go up the river plus whatever time it had taken to sail from Keller in the south to wherever she was in the north. And who knows how long she had sat on that mantle before the night she had been set free. It had been spring in her homeland when last she was there. Now it was spring here in the north. Half a year then. She had been gone a minimum of half a year. Or one or two or three and a half years. Her feet and hands began to tingle and her mouth went dry. She drank from her waterskin, but the weight in her stomach only made her feel sick.

In the afternoon of her thirteenth day on the river she found a level of hope. She had been drifting southeast most of the day when the river she navigated fed into an even larger river flowing east. Better yet, the cliff-like shoreline on the far side of this new river was much smaller than either side of the canyon she had been between for two

weeks now. White dots speckled the shoreline beneath the bluff of the distant shore and a man-made wall garnished the top. She had found a city.

She rowed as hard as she could across the river. The current was slower in the bigger river, but still it pushed her beyond the limits of the city. Never mind, she thought, I can walk back once I land. Facing the high northern cliffs as she rowed south she saw an incredible site. Horses pulled carts up and down a road wide enough for them to pass each other on the face of the northern cliff. A much smaller settlement than the one she rowed toward rested at the bottom of the cliff protected by a half dome carved from the rock. These islanders continued to amaze her.

After a long, strenuous row she made it to the other side and found a place to beach her craft. She wondered if she would need to hide it, but the excitement of making it to a city in which she would not be hunted overwhelmed her caution. She took only what she thought necessary—both swords, as many knives as would fit on her belt, the field marshal's green cloak, and a purse full of coins she had found in the field marshal's pack.

She walked along the coast at the bottom of the bluff toward the city. The shore was more than just sandbars, she was glad to find, but there were still stretches where the water rose all the way to the bluffs and she had to wade through. Twice the water was up to her waist, but she trudged through it until an hour later she walked onto the planks that made up a network or piers for river boats, sailboats, warships, coasters, and barges. The city's biremes and triremes were outfitted with their own ballistae and other incomprehensible war machines. Many of the ships were larger than any she had seen before. She was impressed and a little intimidated. This was beyond any civilization she and the others had ever overthrown.

The piers bustled with soldiers, sailors, and merchants moving cargo and supplies between ships and toward a road that looked carved out of the bluff. A staircase led to a pedestrian gate into the city, and Devika began to climb. There must be twelve hundred steps here, she thought. Halfway up she paused to look over the river that came from the west and the tributary to the northwest that she had left less than two hours before. From the mouth of that tributary she saw a familiar sail rising above a green canopy that matched the cloak she now wore. Another ship from the jungle people. Would they enter the city? She looked down at her field marshal's clothing and green cloak. Could she enter the city? She would need a disguise, and a good one at that.

The gate guard wrinkled her nose at Devika's clothes and then blanched at the sight of her face. "No urchins allowed inside the city. Merchants and citizens only. Move along."

Devika opened the dirty brown cloak, revealing her long sword, and showed the guard her purse. "I am starting a new life. I have money enough to settle me, but need some necessities before moving on."

The guard looked skeptical. Devika jingled the coins in their pouch. The ring of metal made the soldier shrug her shoulders. "Name?"

"Olivia," she lied.

"Business?"

"Clothing, supplies, and then traveling east."

The guard nodded her head at that. "How long?"

"Two nights. Three at the most."

“Leaving through the same gate?”

“I have not decided whether to continue on land or by water.”

The woman pointed at the sword on Devika’s belt. “Is that your only sheathed weapon?”

She thought about the knives on the back of her belt and the short sword under her cloak. “Yes.”

The guard handed her a green ribbon with silver lining on the outsides. “Tie this tightly between the hilt of your sword and your belt anytime you wear it out in the city. Make sure no weapons are seen on your person without a ribbon tying it down. Carrying a weapon not tied down is punishable by imprisonment in the aviary. Welcome to Gabholo.”

She turned quickly to see the river boat oaring against the current across the river, well away from the city side of the water. With that she entered the city of Gabholo.

CHAPTER 16

GABHOLO

[Synopsis: Ustin and Prince Endegar watch from the cliffs as “Sylva” (who is Devika) arrives in Gabholo. They do not see her disguise herself and are unable to find her. They enter the city and see the burnt lady, who is causing a bit of a stir. The boat captain of the second ship tells Endegar of the woman and the knife she carries, but Endegar chooses not to tell Ustin.]

CHAPTER 17

A NEW WORLD

The cartographer's shop sat on a corner between two of eight streets that converged on the town center of Gabholo. The hatching between the several little windows that wrapped around all three walls of the front was painted burgundy. A green sign with a gold compass rose announced the goods sold inside from above the door. A bell rings when she walks in and she hears rustling from a back room. Behind the counter is the only wall not made up of windows, yet it has just as many squares. These ones hold rolled parchments. Each cubby is labeled with the name of a place she has never heard of. She considers leaving, but just then the proprietor stepped out from the open door behind the counter. He gasped when he saw her.

Devika had shed the field marshal's outfit when she reached the city. Now she stood in her new disguise—the clothes of an urchin she had traded with. Somewhere outside the walls of the city lived an old beggar with the clothes of a field marshal. Doubtless having an urchin in his shop would have produced a reaction from the portly man in his fine robes of green and gold, but Devika had out done herself with this disguise. Determined not to be recognized in this city, she had burned her face. Not wanting to destroy her hair—she had her limits as disguises went, and the urchin's clothes were

stretching them—she had tied the tresses back in a wet cloth before lightly rinsing her face in lamp oil. She had washed her hands before lighting herself and then smothered the flames with another wet cloth. The experiment had been painfully effective. Painful to look at, given the fleshy-faced fat man's shriveled up sneer.

She had kept her hair wrapped as she entered through the gates of the city and spotted the young man from the jungle looking at every one that passed. I should have killed you when I had the chance, she had thought. But he had not recognized her deformed face still red, puffy, and blistered from the fresh burns. She had been right to fear the jungle people. They were more persistent than she would have guessed. She realized now that other men must have taken a more direct route on land to reach this city. The young man had not worn his new green cloak, but a plain gray one. He too was in disguise, she knew. This was not their city.

The cartographer's contempt coated his voice. "May I help you?"

Even in her condition, she could not fathom the bald man's airs. He was like a great walking thumb in silk. He stood no taller than herself. The oily texture of his head was only broken up by the black and silver whiskers around his mouth. He spoke in quick staccato with both of his jewel-laden hands tapping on the counter between them. The cut of the gems on his rings was finer than anything she had ever seen. The man's eyes were dull, almost glazed over—like a fish.

"Do you have a world map?" She asked.

The man sniffed. "Finally decided to learn about the world outside your hovel, did you?"

Devika had not taken on such a lowly disguise in many years. The disrespect made the rest of flesh crawl as if she had been burned all over and not just on her face. The man spoke Imperial with a practiced tongue as if to raise himself that much further above the only client in his shop. She spoke clearly, “Is that a no?”

The man frowned at her making his whiskers do acrobatics around his lips. “Do you have money?”

She was taken aback but did not show it. She could barely show emotion with her face hardening into scar tissue. She made herself sound imperious, “I would only like to see it.”

“This is not a library. Libraries cannot afford maps of the entire world. No one has mapped it for a millennium, and even the copy I have is just that—a copy.”

The man’s claim startled her. She buried her confusion. “How much to inspect your copy?”

“One gold coin.”

“Just to look?”

“Like I said,” the man let his lips match the sneer in his voice, “this is not a library.”

She began to think how this man would pay for his insolence. She dug around in the pouch she had found in the field marshal’s pack. There were fifteen gold coins, ten smaller, five bigger—amidst the varied sizes of coppers, silvers, and one metal she did not recognize. The cartographer paid closer attention when he heard the jingling. She laid one of the smaller golds on the table. The man paused before scooping it up. He must have thought his price would send her away and leave him to his map making.

“I will be right with you,” the man said and walked into his back room. She could hear him moving papers and making unfamiliar sounds: soft thuds and the sliding of unidentified materials. When he reemerged, he carried a wooden board that he placed delicately on the counter. The board was covered with glass as smooth as any she had seen. A pristine world map rested between the board and glass.

Confusion washed over Devika. The coastlines did not look at all like she remembered, and she had one of Woorin’s maps in her own study. The basic shapes of the three continents coming down from the north were correct, but the land bridge connecting Pergee and Minlend was represented as a chain of islands. Three of the four southern continents also seemed generally correct, but hers was missing altogether. The topography was unrecognizable. Mountains commanded huge sections of the continents in colors representing elevations she had never seen on a map. She was sure the only brown on her map was a small chain in Minlend. This map showed half of all the continents as mountainous regions. “Is this a joke? Your map is missing an entire continent.”

“I beg your pardon,” the man said angrily, “but this is one of only a handful of copies of The Cartographer’s last map before he disappeared into obscurity. I am currently making a copy of this one to sell to the Duke of Gabholo for 1,000 golds. It represents all six continents as precisely as anyone has attempted in seven hundred years. How dare you pull yourself out of your dirty little hole just to insult my establishment with your presence.”

The Cartographer in obscurity for seven centuries and a thousand gold coins for a map with six of seven continents? What on Kwel was going on here? “Yes. Six continents. What of the seventh? Where is Keller? Why is there nothing but ocean here?”

Now the man looked confused. Slowly his lips curled into a polished grin, distorting the pelt of whiskers that represented the only hair on his head. “Oh, Keller. Yes, of course. Well I suppose that is on the lost world map that included the land of dreams and fairies. If you are done wasting my time...” the man began lifting the map and frame from the counter.

“Wait. I paid my gold. I have another question.”

“A serious one, I hope.”

“Can you show me where Gabholo is on this map?”

The man squinted, not sure what to make of her. He pointed to the eastern part of Weltapero with one of his chubby digits. Her soul had been carried a hemisphere north and a continent west. She was not on an island after all. These mountains and foreign landscapes were on Woorin’s land. She had helped conquer this land, but she had never seen anything like the places she had travelled the last thirteen days. And this man claimed The Cartographer was gone. Seven centuries. How long had she been trapped? More than 700 years? Had they all been trapped by different means? Were any of them free? What happened to Keller? Entire continents do not just disappear, mountains form, and rivers displace. What of Desna? Oh, Desna, she thought, and tears welled up along her scarring eyelids. She blinked and breathed and controlled herself.

“This city here,” she croaked. Swallowing down her anxiety, she pointed to the end of the river she must have travelled. She could barely read the writing. The old runes had

been curved by some future generation she had missed. “Austweg. How long does it take to get to Austweg?”

“Fifteen by barge. The oar men make it in eight.”

“What about the Imperial Road?”

The man’s eyebrows raised in astonishment. “No one travels that road anymore. Not for two thousand years!”

Two thousand. The man had tripled her time away. Her stomach turned over. She was always surprised at the different reactions her new bodies had to emotions that she felt as a being. Some reacted to her anxiety with shallow breathing, even to the point that her hands would tingle. Others got a lump in the throat. This body reacted with nausea. It was as if her emotions triggered a chemical reaction unique to the physical body’s experience. Eventually, the body would attune itself to her being and she would react physically as herself. Strange things, bodies. But not as strange as time. She addressed the man’s surprise, “Hypothetically.”

“Well, if it is still in good enough repair,” he thought. “Ten days?”

If she rowed as hard as she could, it would take nine. If she bought a horse, she could do it in ten with a lot less sweat and no riverboat men on her tail. But there were others who had come by land. She had no way of knowing how many. Only the boy was recognizable to her. Then there was the two thousand year gap of knowledge. The waxy lanterns in the woman’s house; the strange oil lamps; the fine construction of buildings and glass. How much more? Desna, my love. How many more? All gone. The man tapped his pinky on the counter. She needed more information, but this man made fortunes recreating maps he had collected. Her gold was not going to last much longer.

“You are obviously a busy man and the day is getting late. I wonder though. Where I come from, cartographers are also historians. Are you such a one?”

“They have cartographers in your cave?”

“I have money.” She rattled the purse.

With a sigh, the man dulled his tongue. “I own a copy of *The Cartographer’s History of the World*, and have nearly committed it to memory. I am also familiar with the surviving works of all Six immortals, all serious histories of the past thousand years, and many of the more obscure surviving texts from past ages.”

Pompous and greedy. She could exploit those easily enough. Woorin had begun to call the time before necromancy had diminished as “the age of necromancy.” This man spoke of many ages. What age am I from, she wondered. This man would help her figure it out and give her a brief history of the world since she had disappeared. She emptied the contents of her purse onto the counter and separated out the fourteen gold pieces. “I know this is short notice, but you can tell how ignorant I am about the world. I have myriad questions, many of which will seem quite strange to you. But this is what I’m willing to pay if you’ll sit with me tonight and answer them.”

The man walked around the counter and locked the front door to his shop and took down the open sign hanging in the window. He pulled curtains closed over all three walls of windows before returning to the counter where he scooped up the fourteen gold. Then he stood in the door that led to the back of his shop and motioned for her to follow. With a proprietor’s smile he said, “Well then, we’d best get started.”

CHAPTER 18

THE CAGED BIRD

[Synopsis: Devika's errands in Gabholo. Clothing, supplies, and the manipulation of a young woman in the cages of the aviary. Will include reflections on what she learned from the cartographer to help clue in the reader. More about:

- The cataclysms
- The Six immortals (she is the seventh, written out of history after her disappearance in the first great cataclysm several thousand years ago.)
- The change of landscape through another cataclysm
- The curse on the land (*deruspend*, or tree folk)
- The wars among immortals ending with Emperor Bajnok, The General, being thrown into an active volcano
- The immortals' disappearance after the last cataclysm]

CHAPTER 19

A PARTY OF ONE

[Synopsis: Ustin's sixteenth birthday. He receives an anonymous gift from his *dodomen*. It includes a gold scimitar pin, acknowledging that the prince has been his *dodomen* all these years and softening Ustin's opinion of the man. They hear of a cartographer found dead in his shop and begin to suspect the burnt woman of being more than she seems. They catch a glimpse of "Sylva" riding toward the city gate and rush back for their supplies in order to pursue her.]

CHAPTER 20

A TIME THAT WAS

Sylva dangled her feet over the side of the barge and splashed the water with her toes. The barge sat still in the Wooded Sea as men waded in to harvest the trees that made life possible on the vast ocean continent of Keller. Sylva could hear the men working with their saws and axes against the branches of the seawood trees that grew out of the earth beneath the surface of the shallow salt water. But Sylva was not concerned with the production of seawood trees or the work that surrounded her. She was simply glad to be out and away from Dermwed, where responsibilities and expectations threatened to suffocate her. There would be no lessons of etiquette or manners today. Only the sound of men cutting and the still waters of the Wooded Sea. Sylva's reflection stared back at her from between her feet in the water. She wiggled her toes and watched the ripples distort her face.

"Sylva," her father called. She turned to look at her father. He stood five feet and seven toes tall. An average height for the folk of Dermwed. His brown hair was tied in the traditional tail of their people. It made his hair look straight in front, but below the tie his unruly curls fell to the middle of his back. He had green-blue eyes that glowed like the water above the reef when the sun was overhead. His round, high cheekbones gave

way to smooth cheeks. His chin was prominent with a dimple in the middle. His nose had the same roundness at the bottom, but in miniature. It was not a big nose. Most people would be hard pressed to call Sylva's father handsome. His features tended to jump out at you. But he was striking. He especially stood out in his clean, dark blue trousers and the maroon vest with the gold threads in a paisley pattern that marked him as the protector of the city amongst the grime of the barge and the workers in the Wooded Sea. "I want you to make yourself useful this trip. Go with Yaril and cut seaweed from the meadow."

Sylva looked at the man standing behind her father. Yaril was perhaps twenty or thirty. Sylva could not estimate better than that. All adults fit into three categories; younger than her father, around her father's age, or old. Yaril was younger, but already he had a scar from his cheek just below his left eye down to the left of his chin. The scar had been stitched so poorly that the left side of Yaril's face appeared larger than the right side. His whiskers always seemed to be at that length between not having shaved for a while but not quite a beard. He also wore his hair in the traditional tail, but his curls hung more limply from the muck that weighed them down.

Sylva had hoped to be able to get in the water, but diving for seaweed had not been her intention. It was better than being home learning to weave or knit or curtsy or any of that, even if it meant going out with ugly Yaril. Besides, Sylva knew better than to tell her father no. She nodded and stood up. Sylva's father nodded at Yaril who turned and walked toward a row boat at the back of the barge. Sylva followed after Yaril and climbed into the back of the little vessel. Yaril pushed away from the barge with one of the oars and rowed back around the stumps of trees that had already been harvested.

Sylva studied her feet while Yaril rowed them back toward the kelp meadow. Her toes were close to Yaril's. She was fascinated by how different they were. Hers were the toes of a nine-year-old girl. She had perfectly shaped nails, as her mother always insisted. Her feet were smooth and pale next to Yaril's. His were hairy on top and he had scars all over them. Probably from walking on the reef barefoot. He was missing three of his toenails. Sylva looked up at him. He was concentrating on his rowing and looking back over his shoulder every few strokes to make sure he was keeping in the right direction and not running into trees.

Yaril was never one to make small talk. In fact he hardly ever spoke at all. He silently did his job, whatever it happened to be at the time, and did it with all of his awareness. He had been born to one of the *Salkaa*. Sometimes Sylva wished she were a *Salkaa*, living aboard a ship her whole life and travelling the waters of Keller looking for shallows from which rocks or minerals could be found and then trade such to Dermwed or one of the other corral settlements around the Wooded Sea. Some of the *Salkaa* travelled as far north and east as the island kingdom, Aantaapero, to trade for earth grown foods, but those were rarely traded to the corral settlements. Earth grown goods were much too precious. Two years back Sylva had tasted one slice of an orange that her father had paid three full shells for.

Sylva knew most people were frightened by Yaril's ugly looks and strange ways. But Yaril had first come into her father's service around the time she was born and had never done anything to warrant anyone's negative attention. In fact, he was considered her father's favorite by many of his other servicemen. Sylva knew why, too. Yaril was more like a faithful hound, dopey and dutiful, than a thoughtful advisor or self-serving

henchman. Sylva's father liked people who did what he told them to do. "Too much thinking, not enough doing," was what he told Sylva when he caught her daydreaming.

Yaril's family had thought it good to have one of their children learn the ways of the corral folk. So they had given him into the care of Sylva's father and taken Sylva's oldest brother, Ozhum, to learn the ways of the *Salkaa*. Three months later Ozhum had been found by some fishermen floating in a life boat with two of the *Salkaa* from his ship. They were unconscious, severely dehydrated, and close to starvation. Sylva's mother and maids had nursed them back to health. When Ozhum awoke, he had told a story of high adventure at sea and of battles and flaming ships and great sea monsters, or so Sylva believed. She had never actually been told the true story of what had happened to Ozhum's ship. Her brother was the same age as Yaril, so she was only a babe when this happened. But Ozhum and his two companions were the only two left of the fleet of ten ships that had been Yaril's entire extended family. The two surviving *Salkaa* were second cousins to Yaril. After they had mostly regained their strength, they joined with the crew of a visiting ship of *Salkaa*. They had offered to take Yaril with them, but he had chosen to stay with the man who was as close to family as he had now. Sylva's father had been happy to keep him on in his service. Yaril had already done some tremendous feat in the service of her father which had gained him the scar he now wore as well as her father's infinite trust. Again, no one had bothered to tell Sylva the story. Asking about a thing in the Protector's home was never a way to get answers, only a way to get more chores.

Seawood was not just the livelihood of the ocean tribes, but it made it possible to live on this world of salt water. The men on the lumber barges chopped and sawed as much

timber as they could each day while others back at Dermwed worked in the mill cutting the wood into timbers for use as barges, ships, and, of course, the city itself.

Dermwed was a floating city tethered to a huge corral reef that extended from the Wooded Sea. At its center stood the Protector's mansion. This was the most stable structure in Dermwed. Its foundation was made up of the occasional boulders found in the Wooded Sea and built up until its walls breached the surface. Maintenance on all of the structures in Dermwed was constant, and the mansion was no exception. Many barges had to be repaired or replaced after a severe storm buffeted the reef, but the mansion had only been rebuilt three times in its five hundred year history. The foundation was constantly being expanded as well. Any time a boulder was found in the Wooded Sea, the lumber barges would start harvesting in that direction until there was a clear path for the masonry barge to get at the boulder. It would be broken into the largest pieces that the barge could carry back to Dermwed and added to the foundation of the mansion. When a large enough area had been developed, a new structure would be added to the mansion and another three families could leave their barges behind for the relative safety of the mansion.

Thousands of years ago, or so it was said, the sailors who had survived the sinking of Keller by the Great Hand had found the seawoods growing out of the vast emptiness that had once been a continent of land. They had sailed around it for centuries, harvesting wood, building barges big enough to live on in the shallow waters of the Wooded Sea and eventually finding the reef that would become the foundation for Dermwed. In this way the *Salkaa* and peoples of the seawoods were kin. The *Salkaa* had chosen all those years

ago to stay on the water, while their cousins chose the protection of a stone foundation atop the coral.

The meadow was a clearing in the Wooded Sea where kelp and other seawater vegetables grew naturally from the forest floor which varied from three to fifteen feet below water. Most men would tie the row boat to one of the trees surrounding the meadow in order to keep it in one place while they dove and harvested. Yaril stopped in the center of the meadow, preferring instead to explore the open waters with his hands and feet while the boat drifted. Sylva was surprised at Yaril's unconventional sense of abandon. That's one thing we have in common, she thought. No sooner had Yaril brought the oars inside the boat than he rolled over the side with his dagger in hand. Sylva jumped in after him, her own smaller dagger in hand. Before getting to work, though, Sylva swam out a ways and floated on her back. She studied the edge of the puffy white clouds above where they met the azure sky. She was fascinated at the way some clouds had edges like clam shells; a clean, sharp line dividing cloud and blue air. Yet other clouds dissipated slowly into the atmosphere like tattered threads at the end of a comfortable shirt.

Yaril surfaced by the boat with his first handful of kelp. Sylva raised her head and trod water to look at him. He must have known she had stopped working, but he said nothing. He dove back down for more vegetables without a glance in Sylva's direction. She decided to contribute for fear that when Yaril was asked directly about her productivity in the meadow he would answer with truth, though he did not seem to care now. She turned over backward in the water and swam head down to the floor which was closer than she expected. She cut a stalk as fast as she could and resurfaced with the bottom of the stalk firmly in hand. She held the stalk and the knife in the same hand while

swimming a side stroke with her other hand to the boat. Holding to the side of the boat she lifted herself up out of the water just enough to see Yaril's pile of stalks and throw her own stalk on top of it. He had already collected nine. When she threw in her stalk, her knife slipped out of her hand and landed just inside the boat. She shook her head at her own clumsiness and looked over her shoulder to see if Yaril had noticed, but he was submerged. She lifted herself up again, this time wanting to get her waist even with the side so she could reach in and grab her knife. As her waist came even though, a hand grabbed both of her feet together and pushed her out of the water, launching her into the boat. She landed face down on Yaril's pile of kelp. She sprung to her knees and looked behind her to find Yaril grinning widely over the side of the boat.

“Sorry,” he said. “I couldn't resist.”

Sylva smiled, not comfortable enough around Yaril to laugh, but she knew he was just playing around. All of the girls she knew were afraid of Yaril. Most of the boys too. She had never been afraid of him, though she could not say why not. She did not think of him as a friendly older brother, either. He threw some more stalks in next to her and disappeared into the water. Sylva grabbed her knife and jumped from the center of the boat over the opposite side from where Yaril had been. Again she swam away from the boat before diving down head first, but there were no stalks here. At first she thought it must have been a recently harvested patch, but there were no roots either. As she glided over the bottom she reached out and dragged one hand along the meadow's floor. Silt left a trail behind like smoke under water. Beneath her fingers she felt stone. She resurfaced for air and was surprised to find that she could stand. The water was only to her shoulders. She must have been swimming up an incline. The boat was a ways off. With

no kelp obstructing her, she had been able to swim much further than normal. Yaril splashed up over the far side of the boat and let himself fall into it. He reappeared, sitting on the bench and looking around. She whistled the way her dad had taught her; with a curled tongue that allowed her to make a much louder noise without sticking her fingers in her mouth. His head snapped in her direction like a dog on a scent. “What are you doing way over there?”

“I think there’s stone under here.” Sylva was excited by her discovery. Stone meant more permanent settlements could be created on the reef. Yaril started rowing over to meet her where she stood.

As the boat coasted along side her, Yaril asked, “Are you standing?”

“Yes.” She could not keep from smiling like a little kid.

Yaril nodded. “That’s the altar stone.”

Sylva had no idea what an altar was, but she realized what it meant for her discovery. “You already knew it was here?”

“Yes.” Yaril’s smile replaced her own. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll make a great discovery of your own some day.”

Sylva did not reply. Yaril’s kindness surprised her. He rarely smiled and she had never seen him joke around with people. “So why haven’t we moved this stone?”

“It’s too big.” Yaril stretched his arms out as wide as they would go. “But if we can cut to this part of the woods before the new stalks break the surface, I’m sure the masons will come break it up. We should gather some more vegetables before we go.”

With that Yaril placed the oars in the boat and jumped feet first out the opposite side from where Sylva stood. The water came up to his abdomen. He took his knife and

plunged forward into the water and was gone. Sylva did the same and saw that where she had been standing was the most shallow. The stone didn't just drop off, though. Steps had been carved into it. She couldn't imagine why anyone would carve steps into an underwater stone; or how. The steps didn't end at the floor of the Wooded Sea either. They seemed to continue on below the kelp. She harvested the kelp closest to the steps in the hope that she could uncover more steps. Maybe she could uncover something useful—like a smaller altar that could be used for the foundations in Dermwed.

One after another she cut the stalks as fast as she could move her arms under water. After cutting enough stalks to clear a space the size of a step, she started digging in the silt. Soft, slimy silt rolled like underwater storm clouds as she pushed it away from the last step half buried in the sea bed. She had to surface for a moment to breathe. Yaril was at the boat loading an armful of kelp. He looked at her, but she dove right back down and started clearing silt away from the bottom step again. This time she thought she could move more silt with her feet. She put her hands on the upper steps and her feet in the silt and pushed with all the might a child could muster. One foot met resistance. She turned around ready to cut down another stalk if one was in her way, but that was not the resistance she had felt. The light above the meadow undulated on the floor of the water revealing gray, gray, and more gray. But something flashed on the ground where her foot had stopped. She swam toward it head first to take a look. Something protruded from the silt passed the next step which her feet had uncovered; something metal. She grabbed it. She needed air again but wanted to take what ever it was with her. When she pulled on it, she could tell it was metal. But it did not come out of the ground with a simple tug. Part of it was buried closer to the stairs, but most of it was buried going out from the stairs.

She plunged her hand into the silt between the last step and the metal sticking out of the ground. Not far down was another piece of the same object. She planted her feet on the step and pulled on the object while pushing on the stair with her legs. The silt around the object fell away where she had lifted it. A hilt. The blade still hadn't come out. She realized it was buried under the roots of the kelp. Instead of pulling up, she buried her feet in the silt beyond the steps and pulled the hilt straight out as if the ground were its sheath. A short sword with a two foot blade slid out from under the sea floor. Sylva pushed up on the steps and gasped for air when she came up. Then she went right back under. She couldn't stroke with her arms, since she still held her harvesting dagger in one arm and the short sword in the other. This time she kicked off from one of the steps, vaulting herself up to the top of the stone where she stood triumphantly with her head out of the water.

“What are you doing?” Yaril stood in front of her.

Sylva raised her hands in a startled motion.

The hilt of the sword was visible to Yaril when it came so close to the surface. “What is that?”

“I found something,” Sylva said. She could feel the heat of excitement in her chest combined with a sinking feeling in her stomach. A find and a loss. She raised the sword out of the water for Yaril to see. “A sword. It was buried under the kelp next to some stairs carved into the giant stone.”

Yaril lifted his hands so that they were even in front of his torso. He tilted his head toward Sylva as if to silently ask her to place the sword across his palms. Sylva did. Yaril studied the blade first. He brushed his thumb across it on both sides to test its sharpness

without cutting himself. “It’s sharp, but made with bronze. I’m surprised it’s in such good condition. It must have been down there for hundreds of years. Maybe thousands.”

“Thousands?” Sylva was good with numbers, but her nine-year-old mind could not conceive of thousands of *years*.

Yaril held it out at arms length with his left hand. “It’s very well balanced, but the blade doesn’t have much sign of use.” He inspected the hilt. Both cross guards were shaped in the form of a woman’s torso with their heads facing out toward the blade. Their hips melded into the rain guard at the top of the hilt, but their hands gripped each others on both sides of the hilt as if the two women were holding each other to the base of the blade. They were both naked, and Sylva thought their nipples looked sharp. The hilt was not wrapped in leather or wood, but was the same piece of metal as the guards. It had a spiral pattern that made it look like a thin, twine rope had been wrapped around it from the guard to the pommel. The pommel was plain and round, but it held a red agate that was almost jewel-like in its brightness and clarity.

Yaril looked at Sylva’s face. She was forlorn at the loss of her find. Yaril told her, “You know a sword is not a toy?”

“Of course.”

“And if I let you keep it, your father will probably take it away from you as soon as he finds it?”

“You’re going to let me keep it?”

Yaril looked away for a moment. His eyes glazed over as though he were looking at something that only he could see. Then he looked back at Sylva and his eyes cleared again. The smallest semblance of a smile touched the corners of his lips. “Yes. Keep it

safe. It is not a weapon meant for fighting but for decoration or ceremony. Perhaps it is the weapon they used to sacrifice whatever it is they killed on the altar.”

Yaril met Sylva’s eyes again. Her chest swelled with expectation. Yaril held out the sword hilt first. Sylva took it and smiled. Yaril turned back toward the boat and climbed into it. “We should go.”

CHAPTER 21

UNFAMILIAR

Sylva floated the way she had after being stabbed by the assassin that entered Eljin's room. Her head was foggy, as if waking from a deep sleep full of strange but realistic dreams. This wasn't her home. She was in a cage. A plaza lay before her in an elliptical shape with sharp ends made up by the inner and outer walls of a city. The plaza was ringed with hanging cages on all of the walls, and she floated inside one of them. To either side were other cells with one person each. The man in the cage to her right stood at the door of his cell with something like grim determination. Doubtless he had felt that determination days ago, but such feelings falter in a cage where a normal person cannot even sit much less lie down.

On the stone beneath her stood an unfamiliar horse with a cowled woman on a foreign saddle. The woman had a familiar shape, and Sylva thought she should know this person. Her dun cloak and brown pants were customary of Gabholo, but the woman's boots looked like those of a foot soldier of Kelkaam. They even had scuff marks on the toes that reminded Sylva of her own pair. The woman was tying a green and silver ribbon between the unique hilt of a bronze sword and her belt. Sylva gasped, but there was no breath. She had no body. She screamed silently at the woman standing by the bars of her cell. It was

her. Her own face stared up at the body beneath where Sylva floated. Sylva followed the gaze of her own eyes to the body of a stranger, a woman, angled in different directions as if she had just died, and her body slackened against the bars. Sylva looked back to her own body sitting atop an unfamiliar horse with a foreign saddle, and watched herself turn and ride away. She screamed soundlessly at herself to stop. She tried to move toward herself, but she was stuck in place. Then she drifted down the way she had in her home; the last time she had felt anything outside of a dream. But this time she drifted toward the body of a stranger. She struggled away, but it was all a mental exercise. She had no control over her noncorporeal form; she was a consciousness tethered to a dead body that reeled her in. Then all was dark and the sensation of drifting was replaced with the shock of five senses. Feet, knees, tail, and head pressed hard against the bars of a swinging cage. All of them hurt. Her insides hurt as well. She was half starved and the tongue and roof of this unfamiliar mouth rubbed against each other like two sheets of parchment. Some of the people around her wept; some people yelled for mercy; some for innocence. Most of them stood silently with their knees against the bars in front of them and their arse against the bars in back. The smell of excrement was ever present in her nose as it rose up from the pants she wore. Sylva opened her eyes and straightened her back and knees. It was a simple action that required more effort than it should. Pain spurned her from every joint, and thin muscles threatened to give way. When she was upright, she tried yelling in the direction the stranger on a strange horse had ridden off with Sylva's body. It came out as a rasp and she began coughing, but there was little moisture in her lungs or throat. This caused her to wheeze. An itch developed in her throat that she couldn't get rid of for the dryness.

“Wait!” She managed to say but couldn’t think of what name to call out or who she was calling to. “Wait! Sylva. Please, wait!”

Little more than a whisper, her new voice was higher than her normal voice. Her normal voice was gone with her body; lost behind the row of swinging cages and not listening to her. Not feeling her. Not being her. She was not herself.

The man to her right had not even glanced at her while she was yelling; he remained standing and staring at no one in particular outside of his cell. The man in the cell to her left was so skinny that he had managed to sit with his skeletal knees at his throat curled up in a ball whimpering. A child in the row before her. Sylva couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl, but she wondered what crime a child could commit that would warrant a punishment of death by dehydration or exposure. Sylva did not know how she had ended up in a swinging cell inhabiting someone else’s body, but she knew where she was: the aviary of Gabholo. She thought about crying herself, but didn’t want to waste the water.

CHAPTER 22

AN ACT OF CURIOSITY

Over three hundred cages hung from poles mounted to the walls around the gate plaza. Ustin understood the aviary to be a poignant message to visitors not to misbehave during their time in Gabholo. The people in the cages certainly looked humbled. Some of them looked dead. It was perfectly legal to loose a friend or family member from the aviary as long as the lock was still in working order when the cage was open. If the lock was broken, the person who had freed the prisoner would have to pay restitution to the city or take the prisoner's place in the aviary. Because the aviary relied on someone else's generosity or care to loose a prisoner, lone travellers who found themselves in the cages often died there with no family or friends to feed them until they could figure a way out. Merchants had friends and servants who could pay a locksmith to come and break their masters free, but the poor had it worse than the lone traveller. They could come each day and feed the member of their family, but eventually it would become too large of a burden to bear. The imprisoned family member was already a drain on their resources due to lack of wages, and the family would soon have to choose between feeding the prisoner or feeding themselves. Eventually they would abandon their husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers or sisters to the slow fate of dehydration or starvation. Usually for

some minor offense like insulting a dignitary or walking through the city without the ribbon Ustin wore tying the hilt of his sword to his belt.

Prince Endegar led the way across the plaza at a trot. The man was always so focused on his goal. Ustin kept pace with his cow-horse practically eating the tail of the prince's stallion. A loud whistle sounded, not unlike the one Ustin had mastered to call the horses to him, but this time only his horse turned and galloped toward one of the cages along the inner wall of the city. When he tried to rein in the horse, it slowed to a canter but wouldn't stop until it reached a young woman about his age standing in a cage. She looked worn in her shredded clothing, matted hair, and sunburnt face. She smelled of feces and urine. Yet she was comfortable somehow; not as helpless as the rest of the prisoners seemed.

"Ustin," the prince called from across the plaza.

Ustin pulled on the reins. Having reached her destination, the horse was now willing to follow his lead. But as soon as he was turned around, the young woman whistled again and his horse turned right back around to face her. Ustin felt stupid having to beg the pardon of a shit-smelling prisoner of the aviary, but he said, "Please, young mistress, I must be on my way."

The girl smiled at him and the smile felt somehow familiar. "I'd like to be on my way as well, young master."

"I'm sure you would, but my horse can't set you free, and I have no money for a smith."

The woman cocked her head. "Had you the money, would you set me free?"

Ustin didn't have an answer to that. He supposed he wouldn't, but the young woman had tripped him up by calling his horse, so he'd used the first excuse that came to mind.

Instead of answering, he asked, "What is your crime?"

"Murder."

Ustin shook his head. The aviary was only for people who were free to go if they could afford to get free. "Try again."

The young woman grinned at his reaction. She stood above him in her rags and stench and played games with him. Perhaps she was waiting for someone she knew to set her free. If he were waiting for someone, he'd hope they'd get there before he had to humiliate himself with bodily necessities. She said, "I didn't declare my boot dagger. A guard noticed it while I was in the bazaar."

"Why do you insist on calling my horse?" Ustin asked.

"Because I can't call his while he rides it." She looked up, and Ustin followed her gaze. Prince Endegar trotted toward them.

"You're getting me in trouble."

"Nonsense," said the woman. "I'm the only one in trouble here."

"What's the hold up, Ustin?" The prince asked sternly.

"This young mistress called my horse with a whistle."

"Enough games," Prince Endegar said to the caged woman. "We are in need of haste."

"I saw her," said the girl.

The two men stared at her.

"Sylva Seawood."

Prince Endegar's hand moved to the hilt of his short sword. He drew nearer to the cage on his horse.

"I would not taunt you, Prince Endegar of Kelkaam," the girl said solemnly. Ustin could see no trace of the prankish grin she had worn before. She stood straight up to her full height but at the back of her cage, showing the confidence of a woman who would face a prince with the humility of one who would be powerless against him. The prince relaxed his grip but left his palm on the hilt of his short sword. "I saw the woman you must surely seek. She has changed her looks and rides a horse of the Winakwaa. I could give you more details..."

"If I let you out," finished the prince.

"It wouldn't cost you much. Just a small, malleable piece of metal. I will take care of the rest."

"We have seen her," the prince said. He turned his horse and started away. Ustin looked to the girl who no longer seemed confident. She shrunk before his eyes. The prince called over his shoulder, "Ustin."

Ustin started to turn his horse toward his prince but stopped halfway. The woman watched him. He took out one of the travel loaves the prince had given him, his fork, and a copper. He shoved the copper into the bread and the bread onto the fork and held it up to her. She squatted down as far as she could in the narrow cage and reached her hand out toward him. He moved his horse closer until the bread was in her hands and she lifted it up with the copper and the fork. Ustin turned and kicked his horse into a gallop toward the gate of the city.

CHAPTER 23

FORMULATIONS

Sylva had thought about telling them who she was, but decided against it. She knew her husband well enough to guess how he'd react to a complete stranger trying to convince him that she was really his wife trapped in another body. She was having a hard enough time convincing herself of it. Had she told him, she would probably be skewered in that cage.

The copper Ustin gave her hadn't gone far. A bar of soap and a pair of small clothes. She'd stolen new clothes: a farm woman's pants and shirt. They were a little big for the body, but they had been clean.

She was making good time, but the body wasn't conditioned properly for the pace she wanted to set. Getting out of breath bothered her; the body's hunger irritated her; but the aching every morning just made her push harder. She had to steal huge quantities of food from the farms she passed to keep up the pace. When ever she passed through a village, she took the opportunity to steal a little bit more of her outfit: shoes in Esterfield, socks in Hankshire, a belt in Filismill, and better shoes in Karlsdorf. She was likely a half day behind Endegar, and that was the same as being a full day behind anyone else. The man was relentless when driven. Now he was driven to find her, and so was she.

She wished she had a sword, but the smithy she had passed had only one. It likely represented a month's worth of pay for the smith who had made it. So she had only stolen a knife and committed "Alfred's Smith" in Kreeonsmill to memory in hopes of repaying the debt once she was in a position from which she could do so. Soon, she hoped. But the knife made her feel a little safer, especially when the well kept road that mirrored the twists and turns of the river one league to the north diverged from the path of the old Imperial Road. She knew Endegar would not take the Winakwaa Road. He would have renewed his provisions in Gabholo and set off on the shortest rout possible to intercept his prey.

The Winakwaa River bent and strode away from and back toward the Imperial Road. This meant she spent long stretches of her days away from any farms or civilization. Almost a thousand years since the land curse had abated, and the only people not still afraid of the *deruspend* were bandits. She made sure to sleep near inhabited areas which only existed within two leagues of the river. She bathed each night in irrigation canals, and once in a pond, which had not felt cleansing. The young body was becoming familiar to her. It was quite attractive when clean and fed. Her first day out of Gabholo she had tried to jog the entire day. After an hour she felt nauseous and had to walk until she could not do that any more. Her second day out she did a walk-jog pattern that got her further, but it would not catch her up to Endegar. She managed a jog most of the third and all of the fourth day. By the fifth morning out of Gabholo she could see the muscles growing, becoming adequate. Late that afternoon she finally spotted the two men she had hoped to catch. They practiced swords in a camp they had made just off the deserted road across from a farm.

Endegar would not accept her into their party. She knew she would have to prove herself useful to mollify him. She looked at the farmland to the north and had an idea.

CHAPTER 24

ANA

Both the prince and Ustin heard the soft footfalls approach. In unison they stood and drew swords; Ustin from the sheath beside him, Prince Endegar from the scabbard across his back. Pointing their swords in the direction of the sound, they were surprised to see a young woman, no older than Ustin standing just inside the firelight. She held two dead rabbits by the ears in one hand and a live rabbit in the other. “I’m sorry to have startled you. I saw the fire and thought I might join you if I offered some fresh meat.”

The young woman had an outfit cobbled together from clothes that obviously weren’t made for her. The too-big pants were rolled up at the bottom and cinched at the waist with a belt to which she’d added an extra hole to fit her small frame. The shirt she wore she had made fit by tucking it so far into her pants that it molded to her form and the tops of her breasts were clearly visible where the scooped neck hung too low. Embarrassed by his own observations, Ustin looked down at her boots. They were worn, but looked like they fit well enough. She had a slender face with black hair pulled up in a bun. Ustin relaxed his sword arm and let the tip of the blade touch the ground.

“Thank you, but we’ve eaten,” said the prince without moving; his sword still pointed at the young woman.

“Then may I use your fire to feed myself?”

“You don’t live around here?” The prince asked.

“I’ve been travelling alone,” she said.

“You’re not afraid to travel the Imperial Road so far from water?”

“There hasn’t been a sighting of a *deruspend* between Gabholo and Austweg since the last great cataclysm,” she said and looked into the dark outside the fire’s light. “I’m more worried about the bandits who have made this road their safe haven while everyone else holds to their superstitions. I was hoping I could travel with the two of you.”

“I don’t think so,” said the prince. “Move along now.”

Ustin didn’t understand. She didn’t look very dangerous to him. She didn’t even have a sword or a bow. Then he wondered, how did she get those hares?

“I can be useful. I know how to forage these lands. And I’m a decent hunter.” She held up the two dead rabbits. Then she held up the live rabbit. “Resourceful too. Tomorrow’s dinner is already half caught.”

Endegar finally lowered his sword, but not in resignation. “All those rabbits prove is that you know how to steal from the farmers’ traps. I suppose you’d prefer these honest folk starve while you feed their supper to strangers on the road?”

At that the woman dropped the live rabbit which ran from the three of them. She took a knife from her belt and hurled it into the dark toward the fleeing animal. A soft cracking noise sounded in the dark, and the young woman wandered toward it and came back with the newly dead rabbit. Her knife stuck out from its skull. “I’m not a thief.”

Ustin now understood the prince’s suspicion. This young woman was far more dangerous than she appeared at first glance. The prince had been wise enough to suspect

that, while Ustin had assumed a young woman travelling without a sword was no threat. Now he waited for the prince to send the woman away without further argument.

“Well then,” said the prince as he replaced his sword on his back, “let’s spit them while they’re still fresh.”

The young woman smiled and stepped toward the fire. There was something familiar in that smile. She dropped the two coney in her left hand on the ground and knelt down with the third. She looked as much like a hunter as she had a road bandit, but Ustin watched her skin the animal with skilled hands; slender fingers without calluses. Uncertain whether or not he should accept the meat, he looked at his prince who nodded at him. He picked up one of the remaining animals and knelt by the fire—far enough from the woman that he could watch her in his peripheral vision while staying out of arms reach. Not that it matters, he thought, she could throw that knife through my eye before I realized what she was doing. By the time Ustin had his rabbit on a spit, the woman had finished both her first and second hares. She smiled at him from across the fire. He shook his head trying to place her face. Austweg had been the first place he had seen any women her age outside of the fen. No one at the inn had been her age, except for him. He’d seen random women on the street. Perhaps his mind had mixed them into this single visage before him—the every-woman of Austweg. No, he thought, she is too pretty to be the every-woman. And none of the women in Austweg had smiled at him. They had passed through several villages, but they had not stopped. The prince had insisted they sleep on the road. Ustin was sure he hadn’t noticed any young women while trotting through town.

The prince seasoned the roasting hares with a mixture of dried herbs from his pack. This was the first fresh meat on the road since the horse steaks. The young woman stretched out around their fire lying on her side with one elbow under her for support. The three of them watched the rabbits' juices congeal on the bottom of their carcasses and listened to it hiss on the coals when it dropped. The prince broke the silence. "Do you have a name?"

"Ana," she said. The smile she gave the prince reminded Ustin of his sister's face just before she told a joke. The prince looked at her with an interest Ustin hadn't seen in the man's eyes before. Perhaps she looked familiar to him too.

"Ana," the prince repeated. "That's a good name."

"Thank you," she looked at Ustin as if expecting him to say something as well, but Ustin stayed quiet. Silence had become comfortable to him. Then she looked back at the prince. "Do either of you have names?"

"I am Endegar and this is Ustin."

She looked at them and nodded with a polite smile. She seemed to have a smile for everything. "I don't suppose one of you has needle and thread I could borrow?"

Endegar nodded at Ustin. Ustin was glad to get up and away from the fire. He had been mimicking the easy way his father always sat by a fire with one knee up and his other leg out, but he was sure he was the most uncomfortable one of the three. He knew right where his sewing kit was in his saddle bag, but he considered rummaging around just to waste time. Instead he went back to fake relaxation again. He handed the kit to Ana and resumed his father's favorite fire-watching position.

“Thank you, Ustin.” The way she talked felt familiar too. He definitely hadn’t spoken to any young women in Gabholo—except for the girl in the aviary. Ana pulled two objects wrapped in fabric out from under her belt, laid them on the ground, and opened them. One of the objects was a bar of soap. The other was a familiar looking fork. The last tine was shaped in waves as though someone had tried to straighten it after it had bent in every direction.

“Ustin,” the prince grinned, “someone has your affinity for tableware on the road.”

“Where did you get that fork?” Ustin asked.

The question didn’t surprise Ana. She gave him the same smile she had given the prince when she’d told them her name. “A kind young man gave it to me. It was stuck inside a loaf of bread.”

Ustin clenched his jaw to keep it from dropping. He had expected the answer, but was still amazed to be right. The girl from the aviary had picked the lock with a fork and caught up to them on foot.

“You must have run the entire time to find clothes, soap, a knife,” he looked at her for a moment, “bathe, feed yourself, and catch up to us all in three days.”

Ustin followed Ana’s gaze to the prince. The man flipped the three hares on their spits with a neutral expression while Ustin looked back at Ana and waited for her to explain.

“Yes,” she said, facing Ustin again. “My feet are much more callused than my hands.”

Ustin blinked. Had she noticed everything he’d observed about her? Even if she had seen where he looked, she could not know what he had thought. Who knows what went through her mind when he was looking elsewhere. He tried to fight the warmth in his face by scooting further from the fire, but the heat seemed to follow. Ana had mercy on him by

picking up the bits of fabric that had held her objects. She began to stitch them into pouches, while the fire and sizzling juices made the only noise in camp.

After dinner Ana laid down her cloak by the fire and fell asleep. Ustin looked at the prince who nodded at him; permission to sleep. The prince sat on his bedroll but did not lie down. Doubtless he would watch Ana until he was comfortable with her presence. Perhaps he wouldn't sleep at all. Ustin couldn't force himself to worry about the woman. He slept as if it were the end of any long day on the road with the Tiger of Kelkaam.

The next morning Ustin woke to find the prince packed and ready to go. Ana was nowhere to be seen. Ustin hurried and replaced his bedroll behind his saddle and mounted. The prince nudged his great black stallion into motion without a word, and Ustin followed. Ustin had spent days and nights alone with the prince too intimidated to initiate conversation, but that had changed when the prince had given him the gold scimitar pin and Ustin had realized that Prince Endegar had been something like a secret patron to him all these years. Every evening Ustin reported his observations of the day, they practiced swordplay, ate, and most nights the prince told Ustin a little bit more about his history with his estranged wife. But no matter how safe Ustin felt around the prince, he knew the man was dangerous and capable of things Ustin didn't yet understand. Ustin wasn't sure he himself liked Ana, but he wished her no harm. It was mid-morning before he worked up the courage to ask the prince, "Where is Ana?"

The prince looked at him with hard eyes that softened with a blink. "She is safe."

The two rode on for a little while longer in silence before Ustin asked, “Why did you keep your sword on her when you thought she was a thief, but then let her stay when she proved skilled with a knife?”

“Desperation is far more dangerous than competence.” The prince didn’t expound, so Ustin was left to figure it out on his own.

“Why then drive her off?”

“Because she knows who we are and who we are chasing. Yet we know only a handful of things about her: she was in the aviary for not having her blade tied, she is excellent with a knife, she picks locks like a thief, and she ran for three days straight to catch up to us. Desperation *and* competence are the most dangerous mix of all.”

Ustin thought on this for a time. He understood the prince’s concern, but Ustin wondered if there was a third way. “Wouldn’t it be better to have someone like that where you can watch them?”

The prince stared at him a moment and then prodded his mount into a canter. Ustin decided it was a good time to leave off. Prince Endegar had said or done something to be rid of a nuisance, but Ustin was sure the man hadn’t done anything drastic. That was good enough for Ustin. The fact that his prince and travel companion was a fierce warrior had come as no surprise, but there was an edge to the prince that suggested he could be merciless when necessary. Ustin just didn’t know when he would see such necessity. He did not look forward to it. It also bothered him that he had slept so heavily through whatever disturbance there might have been.

The two rode in silence until it was time to stop for the day. With dusk came a dinner of lukewarm rations and sword practice. Prince Endegar no longer took off his leathers to

practice with Ustin. A show of respect since Ustin had left a large welt on the man's arm a week back. Ustin still ended up with more bruises than the bigger man, but he improved every day and slept well at night. The prince had Ustin on the defense when Ustin saw a cloaked figure walking up to their camp from the Imperial Road. Ustin held up his sword and called, "Hold!"

The prince was in full swing and had to step backward to avoid hitting a defenseless Ustin at full force with his practice blade. Then the man turned to see what had caught Ustin's attention. Ana pulled the hood of her cloak down when the prince turned. The prince looked back at Ustin and blew air through his lips. Exasperation, Ustin thought. Twice Ana had frustrated the prince's attempt to leave her behind. Why *was* she following them?

"Good day, gentlemen."

Ustin looked at the prince to see what he would say; or do. The man faced her and nodded. "You might stand on that side of the fire until we've finished."

Ana nodded back, walked as far as the coals of their fire and continued to stand.

The prince turned back to Ustin, lifted his sword, and said, "Again."

The two clashed for half a glass more. The prince frequented glances at Ana; Ustin assumed he was keeping tabs on her, but the younger man didn't let that stop him from taking advantage of his elder's distraction. Ustin caught his prince off balance several times before landing a blow to the man's side.

"Ha," cried Ana, "the tiger is bested by the cub!"

Endegar whipped his head half way around before stopping himself. It was a common enough phrase, but the prince was only known as the Tiger of Kelkaam to the people of

the fen. The coincidence could represent a level of familiarity beyond Ana's mere recognition of the prince and his wife. Ustin watched Prince Endegar's face change. His jaw relaxed. He lowered the blade of his practice sword until its tip touched the ground. Then his eyes brightened as if the pulleys and ropes in his head had lifted a light behind them. "Do you know the *Pektong*, or do you only fight with knives and rabbits?"

"A sword is what they took from me in Austweg."

The prince raised his eyebrows. "I suppose your smooth hands and rough feet are a sign that you held the sword with your toes."

"Would you like to see?" she said smiling. Her smile reminded Ustin of someone.

Prince Endegar held the hilt of his practice sword out to her. "By all means."

She grinned as if she'd just won her first game of dice. She untied her cloak and handed it to the prince in trade for his sword. The prince stood back by the fire, folded his arms over the cloak, and waited. "Shall we move through the practice positions first, or straight to sparring?"

"Sparring."

Ana clucked her tongue at him the way Arms Master Sylva would have had he chosen that in the practice ring. The arms master said there was only one right answer to that question. But Ana was no arms master. Still, Ustin would not underestimate anyone who could decapitate a rabbit in the dark from ten paces away with a knife that wasn't meant for throwing. "Terms?"

"First killing strike," she offered.

He touched his sword to hers and waited. Ustin liked to let new opponents move first. It allowed him to take the defensive and analyze their skill. But Ana stood as still as he did.

“This is going to be a long melee,” Prince Endegar said from in front of the fire.

Ana and Ustin both grinned without looking away from each other. If she wouldn't show him what she could do, then he would try to take the surprise route. He whirled into an aggressive *Aldfen* attack pattern that left false openings that opponents, especially those that only knew *Pektong*, would likely try and fail to capitalize on. Ana defended with *Pektong* but took none of his false openings. When he backed her up as far as she could go without stepping on the prince's toes, she made a couple of aggressive ripostes that had Ustin backing up the other way. Ustin switched to *Pektong* to defend in a more traditional style. The mechanics of *Pektong* felt good to him against an opponent who wouldn't know *Aldfen*. There was a consistency to the fighting that felt orchestrated. But Ustin wasn't satisfied to stay on the defensive forever, so he burst into *Aldfen* just long enough to take back the offensive. Then he switched to a formal offense in *Pektong*. Ana was an excellent sword, but somehow her technique was off. Ustin couldn't explain it. She knew all of the forms and executed them well, but something about the way she moved made him think of a duck flying with a goose's wings. Or perhaps it was the other way around. Then she punched him in the mouth. Ustin hadn't been expecting that. He knew he should have been expecting anything, but something about Ana's slender fingers made it hard to believe she could be very effective at hand-to-hand combat. The shock of a punch to the face often made a fighter sloppy. They might charge without realizing where their opponent's blade was or take a wild swing that was easily dodged and left

them open. Ustin had been trained not to make those mistakes. He saw that Ana's sword was positioned to stab in case he charged, but her feet were placed well enough to keep her balance should she need to absorb a wild swing. Ustin feinted toward her with his entire body expecting the sword to come straight forward as it did. But instead of finishing the charge head on, he twisted his body sideways and held his blade parallel to his torso where it would stay between her sword and his leathers. Then he bent his legs enough to bring his shoulder level with her sternum and pushed her up and back with enough force that her feet left the ground. She grasped at air and dropped her sword so she could catch herself. Ustin followed her. As soon as she landed with two feet in front and two hands in back, Ustin held his practice blade aloft for the killing strike.

“Stop!” Called the prince. Ustin looked at him and then back down at Ana. The young woman was teetering on four tiny limbs and wasn't wearing any armor. Surprised at himself, Ustin hurried to lower his sword and offer the woman a hand up. She took it and smiled more broadly than he had seen her smile yet. What an odd reaction to losing, he thought.

“That was well played, Ustin Or...” She stopped.

“Or?” Ustin asked. It sounded like she'd been about to call him by his last name.

“Or should I call you ‘tiger cub?’”

Ustin looked at the prince, but the man didn't seem any more perturbed than he had before. Coincidence or not, Prince Endegar kept silent. In fact, the man didn't speak another word that night. Shortly after Ustin's bout with Ana, the prince lay down on his bedroll and closed his eyes, while Ustin and Ana sat next to the diminishing coals and

chattered on about sword play. Mostly they discussed *Pektong* and the night's sparring match. Then Ana began to pry.

“Those were some wild moves you made,” Ana said.

Ustin grinned a little and nodded.

“Is that something they teach in the fen?”

Ustin looked at the prince and was sure the man was not asleep. Why had he left Ustin alone with this woman? Ustin decided the question was harmless enough, but would have to change the subject. “Yes. I learned all of my swordplay in the fen. Where did you learn *Pektong*?”

“Austweg. That's where I'm from, and where I'm headed.”

“Why were you in Gabholo?”

“That's not much of a story,” Ana said. “Tell me more about the fen.”

Ustin could tell she was hiding something. Perhaps the prince was hoping Ustin could draw it out through casual conversation with a young woman his same age. But Ustin had no confidence in any such ability. He had studied language with Master Althea, the histories of Kwel with Master Iimen, arithmetic and geometry with Master Ester, the military arts with Master Ooris, and even had a few geography lessons with the prophet himself. Arms Master Sylva, of course, had taught him the martial arts of sword, spear, bow, and hand-to-hand combat. But no one had bothered to teach him how to talk to women, much less draw out information. For all of his observation and mimicry skills, he couldn't think of a time he'd watched somebody do it either. He had no training, no model, and no practice. He hoped the prince wouldn't be too disappointed in his efforts.

Sylva worried about the conversation being too focused on her. She would offer simple answers and keep track of the lies, but it was not her game. She had lived the life of a straight forward person; a sword, an arms master, a soldier, a field marshal. One straight forward thing lead to another.

“The fen is exactly what it sounds like. A swampy jungle rife with wild animals, poisonous fruits, and a handful of people crazy enough to live there.”

Sylva smiled with the stranger’s lips. Ustin gave her the answer all *Fenpela* were trained to give if they spoke to outsiders. “You wear very fine clothes for someone who grew up in the wild.”

Ustin shrugged and changed the subject. “Why did you choose the life of a thief?”

“Why do you think I’m a thief?”

“You can pick a master lock with a fork, you’re not wearing a single piece of unstolen clothing, and throwing knives are often the favored weapon of a thief.”

“Well, I seem ready for trial, master lawyer. Perhaps I’ll steal your fancy red cloak to replace this tattered old thing I wear now.”

“I’m sure Endegar was more worried about the horses.” Ustin grinned like his father, Insek; more in the eyes than in the lips.

“And what would you do if I tried to steal your horse,” Sylva teased.

“I’d kill you.” Ustin’s voice was conversational.

Sylva smiled broadly through someone else’s lips. Ustin’s body mutated from casual to caustic. “You don’t believe me?”

The lips she wore retracted over the teeth until they were almost touching again. She had never seen that look in Ustin’s eyes before. He gave her the dead-eye of a soldier; a

veteran of battle. And he did it the same way Endegar did. No human connection between him and his opponent. She knew he was a mimic and could copy just about anything, but there was a level of honesty in his eyes that left her cold; proud. She had never been on the receiving end of that look from someone she loved as much as Ustin. She resisted a shiver. More seriously, she said, "I believe you'll do what you've been trained to do."

Ustin nodded at her. Then he looked away. When he met her eyes again, she could see a glimmer of humanity back in the familiar boy's face. Familiar man. A man she'd been familiar with as a boy. She was having a hard time defining her relationship to Ustin as he sat before her. She thought about telling Ustin she wasn't a thief, but realized she would just have to make up something else if she did. He didn't seem to mind, so she left it alone. She had considered telling him who she was, but now she wondered if it would go over as poorly as if she told Endegar. Ustin was bright and observant. Perhaps there were other ways to tell him without saying it out loud. She thought about that for a while. She had already revealed she knew more than a typical outsider, but that had only raised suspicion. But Ustin was a mimic and Endegar her husband. Perhaps they would notice habits more. Perhaps they already had.

But the conversation had grown awkward with Ustin so she feigned exhaustion and fell asleep under her tattered cloak.

Sylva woke to the sound of men packing horses. When she opened her eyes, she caught Ustin glancing at her as he rolled up his travel bed. He looked away as soon as she met his gaze. Endegar mounted his horse while Ustin tied his bedroll to his saddle. Sylva stood up and dusted off her cloak from a night of sleeping in the dirt. Endegar glanced at

her before nudging his horse into a walk. Ustin mounted his horse and followed. He spared a longer look at her and shrugged. When the two of them reached the road, they spurred their horses into a canter until they were well away from her. On my own again, she thought.

Sylva walked down to the road. Then she sprinted to catch up to the men. They were well ahead, but the land here steadily declined, and the whole point of the old Imperial Road had been to make as straight a path as possible between the cities of the empire. She could still see them in the distance, eating their morning rations in the saddle. She smiled at her husband's obstinance toward the stranger that was her. He was a good husband. He barely looked at this body. She would need to change that, but she wasn't yet sure how. Or why.

It was a good body, she had decided; young, pretty, unscarred. It was not strong enough yet, but it had the potential to become so. She ran a little harder with that thought. Days of running and the recovery time was amazing. She woke every morning with sore legs from running the day before and sore everything else from sleeping on the ground. Yet after running for half an hour, the body warmed up and the aches and pains subsided until the next morning.

When she caught up to the riders she jogged passed Ustin until she was next to Endegar. He looked down at her and then back at the road ahead. Even as husband and wife, he rarely spoke when travelling. His eyes stayed focused on his destination. But his usual determination felt tainted to her. He searched the landscape for signs of other travelers, brigands, and new plants to put in his tracker's notebook. But his eyes were glazed, not as sharp in their focus. The man was subtle and hard during the day. He had

always come alive at night by the fire, but not these past two evenings. Perhaps just the presence of a stranger was enough to mute him.

She wished she knew this body's real name. Instead she had given it the name Endegar had wanted to name a daughter if by some miracle she had born one. Seven thousand years of one male heir producing exactly one more male heir in straight succession without a brother or sister in history, and the man had still insisted on having a contingency name for a girl; Ana. Sylva had hoped that the name would endear her to him, but it hadn't been enough for him not to tie her up and leave her behind a farmer's house two nights before. She hadn't even woken up during her transport. He must have drugged her. That was not like Endegar. Perhaps he had not wanted to disturb Ustin. That didn't seem like Endegar either. Whatever the reason he had drugged her then, he seemed content to let her trail along now.

CHAPTER 25

ARMS MASTER SYLVA

[The realization of who “Ana” really is dawns on Ustin. He hints at it to her, and she confides in him, begging him not to tell Endegar for fear that the prince’s sorrowful rage will get her killed before she can convince the man of the truth. They catch up to Devika, but stay far back for reasons Ustin does not understand.]

CHAPTER 26

CHANGES OF THE UNPLANNED

The pulse of her body far away overpowered her senses. She couldn't focus on the oscillating light of the stars. The waves of heat from the fire left no trace on her skin. Crickets beat out a percussion to the anthem of go, find, kill. She couldn't sleep knowing that her body—with whatever soul inhabited it—lay so close. They would reach Austweg by tomorrow night. Endegar hoped to catch up to “Sylva” before then. Her chance to confront the being in her body without the complications Endegar might pose was passing her by like the moon above. She listened carefully to the ebb and flow of the men's breaths. Even. She stood up as quietly as she could and stole away from camp. When she was sure she was out of earshot, she sprinted down the road. The farms to the north grew sparse until there was nothing but fields of wild grass on either side of the road.

She didn't need to track. She knew right where to take this body in order to find herself. As the road curved north, she could tell that it was no longer the shortest route to her body. She forced herself to stay on the road as long as it got her closer, even if it wasn't as direct. Travelling through the tall grass would slow her down more than the detour. Then she was there; she had reached the point where she was closest to her own

body without leaving the road. It was time to move into the grass. She listened for the sound of breathing, a horse stepping, someone rolling over in their sleep, but all she heard was the light rustle of tall grass in the night breeze. She could hear her own foot steps as she prowled through the field south of the road. No matter how careful she was, they rung in her ears like a fanfare announcing her arrival. She was determined to catch herself unaware, but the dry grass would not cooperate with her efforts to stay silent. She had no way of knowing the abilities of the person now in her body. She would assume the worst and tread lightly. Lighter still, she thought as the grass beneath her feet whispered like a child telling a secret that everyone could hear. She stepped into the woman's horse before finding herself. Someone had made a clearing in the grass. Sylva knelt down in the grass to look under the horse's belly and saw a form sleeping soundly on a bed roll. She stood again and felt for the knife at her belt. She drew it out as she moved around the horse. It wasn't long enough for a quick kill under the ribs and into the heart. She would have to slit her throat. Someone else's spit dropped down the throat as she swallowed at the thought. She had killed many times on the battlefield, but never in cold blood. The longer she paused, the harder her insides pulsed. The horse swished its tail in her face as she moved beyond it. Then she saw the familiar shape lying next to her own body; two small, bronze women grasped arms to keep their torsos locked at the waist around the base of a short sword blade. The soul on the ground had stolen it along with her body after she herself had been assassinated. That body no longer belonged to her. It did not respond to her desire to run or lift a fork to her mouth. The food in that mouth no longer nourished her. She stood listening to the waving grass and the crickets. It was not those ears that played the music of the world for her. The eyes behind those sleeping lids would not see

the stars for her. She did not know how to reverse this spell, and looking at this foreign being, she realized she could not confront the soul who did. It was too powerful. The inner pulse quickened and she took a step forward. The adrenaline pumped with the blood to the brain. Four more steps and she knelt next to herself. Without thinking, she had replaced the small knife at her belt. The bronze blade will make a cleaner kill, she thought. She had felt its sharpness, if only for what should have been her final moment. This being's only mistake had been to leave her alive in the aviary. It must be this person who had the power to move souls. How else had she ended up in this stranger's body looking out at herself and no one else?

That's it then, she thought, this is the second assassin. This must be how she proves her kill; by returning in the body of the dead. Sylva would not allow it. She drew the bronze blade from the leather sheath this assassin had acquired for it. She angled the blade toward her heart while holding it just above a shirt she didn't recognize so the body thief would not feel it through Sylva's stolen skin—not until it was too late. After one inhalation of breath for courage, she thrust with the exhale and watched her eyes open in shock before they dimmed with death. She had seen herself look like this once before. Her hazel eyes had stared at the ceiling of her hearth room as her disembodied soul looked helplessly at the once familiar flesh. Now that flesh was dead. The pulsing was quiet. The night sounds grew louder and the moon brighter. She could focus fully on her surroundings for the first time since inhabiting this body.

She removed the bronze blade from the corpse and resheathed it. She thought about gathering up the rest of the assassin's possessions, but decided it would be best if Endegar found a dead body in this camp. The circumstances would remain a mystery to him, but

he would have closure on the body that was his wife's, giving Sylva the chance to convince him that she was the only incarnation of that person left. The bronze blade, however, she would not leave. She had kept it with her for over twenty years and would not have it confiscated by anyone again. She would have to figure out a way to hide it from Endegar until he knew the truth, but that was the least of her troubles now. Birds began singing. That meant she had only an hour until sunrise, and she still had to sneak back into camp. If either men had awakened in the night, she would have to part ways with them before they found the body. Endegar would suspect her of murder if he knew she'd been out the night his wife's body had been permanently destroyed. She ran back through the grass as fast as she could. She had to hurry back, but shortly down the road the pulsing began again.

She awoke as if from a nightmare. Coming back to consciousness only to see her own body skulking around the woman who had promised to free her had been unnerving at best. Wearing the body of that woman was horrifying. This was not the arrangement. The woman had offered her own body to her, but she had deemed it too old. The woman had laughed with mirth at the insult and promised she could have whatever body she chose once they reached Austweg. Perhaps this was temporary. Perhaps the woman had given her this body while she pursued her own opportunity. But her body was not supposed to be here. It was supposed to be in the aviary. Her old body was supposed to die there, not follow along. No, something was not right. She was not supposed to awaken until Austweg. She had seen herself leave through the grass before being dragged down into this body. It had been a few minutes now, and she had a horse besides. Surely it was safe

to leave. She could ride to Austweg on her own and wait for the sorceress. The woman would recognize her by this body and they could assist each other according to plan. If it turned out the sorceress had abandoned her, well, she didn't want to think about that just yet. She lead the horse out of the grass to the road and mounted up. The sky was lighting to her right. East, she thought. Austweg. With that she nudged the horse into a trot.

Endegar rounded the bend at a jog. Ana had proven fast, but he was sure he could keep up at a quiet pace. Not so. She had run faster than he could keep up while being quiet. Somewhere behind him Ustin walked the horses. The young man had good instincts and was right to wake him when Ana had left the camp in the middle of the night. Why she had continued on without them, he could only guess. Following her, he hoped to find out. When a figure appeared out of the southern fields, he ducked into the tall grass himself. He was sure the figure coming toward him was Ana, but what had she been doing? She held something. It looked the length of his forearm, perhaps a little longer. As she drew closer he was sure it was a sheathed short sword. Where had that come from, he wondered. Perhaps she hid it here on her way to Gabholo, but why? She passed him on the road without noticing the break in the grass. He was about to step out and follow her back toward camp when she stopped. He leaned back in the grass and waited. Ana spun around and looked in his direction. It was still too dark to see her eyes, but she could have been looking right at him. He stayed still and even held his breath. Then she sprinted back toward him and drew the weapon he'd seen her holding. He gripped his own sword behind his back and prepared to draw it, but she stayed on the

road and ran past him. He stepped out and followed her at a jog as before. Soon he heard voices.

“How?” Came Ana’s voice as a shriek. Endegar began to sprint.

“Are you the sorceress?” Came another voice both familiar and foreign.

“You cannot have that body!” Ana cried.

Endegar caught sight of Ana addressing a mounted woman in the road. In the light before dusk he could just make out the way her hand clenched her weapon. She was about to strike.

“Wait!” Called Endegar, but it was too late. By the time the words left his mouth, Ana’s arm was fully committed to the strike. The familiar form of his wife doubled over in the saddle of a foreign horse. She fell forward. Ana tried to catch the body, but succeeded only in a clumsy easing of its fall to the road. Endegar was on the young woman before she had fully stood up with the killing blade in hand. He grabbed her sword wrist and smacked her across the face with the full force of his free hand. “What have you done!”

“Endegar, no,” she cried. “You don’t understand.”

“You killed my wife before my very eyes!”

“No, Endegar. I am your wife.” This time Ana ducked, and Endegar’s hand only braised the top of her skull. “I know you. I know everything about you from the time we met in Bayside.”

“Liar!” He twisted her wrist until she was forced to drop the blade. He gripped her arm so hard that she was forced to bend down with him as he picked up the bronze artifact. “You killed her with her own prized sword.”

“My prize,” Ana cried. “I found it by the alter stone while cutting seaweed with Yiril.”

“Stop!” Endegar yelled, holding up her arm in his hand and the short sword in the other.

“I told you that story after I achieved first touch on you in the king’s courtyard at Bayside. I told you the name of my homeland, the Seawoods, but you didn’t know of my family markings until the first time we made love under the nuptial tent. You promised you would never tell anyone about those markings as long as I promised never to show them to anyone else but you.”

Endegar added indignation to his rage as he heard this assassin speak the personal details of his and Sylva’s life together.

“Stop, I said,” and he punched her in the face with the fist that held the blade.

“You must listen to me,” she pleaded. “I thought you didn’t love me. I thought you judged my age, my foreignness, my scars. I thought...”

“Stop!” He punched her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her. When he brought his fist back, Ana’s whole body came with it. Their bodies pressed together with the sword pinned between them. He pushed her back and tried to pulled the fist and sword back again, but she came with it and cried out in pain. He pushed her one more time but did not try to pull back. He looked down and saw decorative hilt had caught on her shirt. He pulled her down on the ground by the arm he still controlled. Placing a knee on her chest, he tried to untangle the hilt. The hilt was not the problem, he realized. The blade had broken skin when he had punched her. He tried to draw it out, but it would not come. It was a shallow wound on the side of the blade. There was no reason for it to stick, but it

was as if the blade had fused to Ana's stomach. When he pulled on it again, she screamed. Then he noticed the sword was moving. He let go of it, and still it moved of its own accord, rotating into her flesh until the tip was covered by her skin. He took his knee off of her chest. "What is happening?"

Ana looked down at the blade and turned white. "Magic."

"What magic? This is not wave magic."

"It must be the magic that took me from my body and put me in this one."

"What? How..." Endegar paused. "Sylva?"

She nodded. Then she turned to the side and retched all over the broken stones of the imperial highway. The blade cut into her lower organs as the tip revolved up under her rib cage. "Tell Eljin I love him."

"Sylva?" Endegar said in a panic. He gripped the sword again, but before he could pull, her hands came to rest on his. Then he roared, "Sylva!"

"Yes, Endegar, you too." The words came out in a rasp before blood ran from her mouth.

"No, no, no, no, no," Endegar shook his head. He felt the sword loosen in her body. "No, no, no, no, no."

He spoke the words over and over like a mantra; a *prayer*, the prophet would call it. He had no words for such things—no words but "no." Without thinking, he pulled the ceremonial blade that had hung on his wall for years now out of the body. He wiped the blade clean on his own pants and held the hilt to his head as he rocked back and forth continuing his chant.

He didn't hear Ustin until the young man yelled, "Sylva!"

Endegar did not so much as turn around. He just kept rocking back and forth over the corpse of a stranger that had held the mind of his wife.

“Arms Master Sylva!” Ustin kept yelling as he got closer. “Field marshal! Whoever you are, wait! Stop!”

Then Endegar heard the thump of heels on hide, and dirt sprayed over him. He looked up to see his wife’s body riding off on the horse from which she had fallen only minutes before. He looked back at Ustin and saw the guard running with reins in either hand and a horse to either side behind him.

“She’s getting away!” Then Ustin looked down at the figure before Endegar. “Sylva!”

Endegar looked up at the recognition in Ustin’s face. “You knew?”

“What happened to her? Why is she dead? Why?”

“You knew?” Endegar rose and glared down on Ustin. “Why did you keep this from me?”

Ustin knelt down by the prone body of Ana who was Sylva. “Did you do this?”

“I didn’t know who she was. I thought she had killed... Why did you keep this from me?”

“Because she told me to,” Ustin whispered over the body. “Because she was afraid of this.”

Endegar reeled. He looked back the way his wife’s body had fled. “I need answers.”

“Go!” Ustin commanded. “I’ll stay with her.”

Endegar climbed atop his black and rode hard toward Austweg.

Ustin wept. Not hard, but he couldn't keep it all in—especially when he looked at her wounds. Her cheek was darker than the rest of her fading color. Her nose had been broken. He wondered at the hilt sticking out from under her ribs. It had been a clean kill. A straight shot to the heart. How had the prince figured out who she was when she had obviously died so quickly? He shivered at the thought of the Tiger of Kelkaam beating his own wife before stabbing her through the heart. He decided to wash her up before the prince returned. She had been obsessed with washing. He would make sure she left this world clean. He dug through his pack for his hygiene kit. When he turned back to Sylva's borrowed body he noticed the sword had slipped partway out of her body. Strange, he thought, it rests at a downward angle. He was still not that familiar with death and decided some force inside the body must have pushed it out by some natural internal process. As he knelt down beside the body, he swore he saw the blade moving. He stared at it and was astonished that indeed it did move at a slow but steady pace. Disgusted, he pulled the blade all the way out, so he wouldn't have to watch it move anymore. Then he took the soap out of his kit and opened his waterskin. The shirt was cut in a strange fashion for a straight shot to the heart. It was cut from the belly to the kidney. He moved the hole in the shirt over the top of where the hilt had been in preparation to wash the killing wound, but he could not find it. He moved the hole up, down and around every part of the torso beneath the ribs. No wound. He put down the soap and waterskin and picked up the knife.

“Please don't hurt me.”

“*Skiit!*” Ustin sat up and pointed the blade at the talking corpse.

“Please,” the body stayed still, but was now tense with fear instead of relaxed in death. The eyes were focused on him and she blinked.

“Sylva?”

“My name is Mitra.”

“How?”

“Please,” she said. “I swear I don’t know.”

“How did you come here?”

“I don’t know,” she repeated. “I met a woman in Gabholo who promised to free me from the aviary. She spoke of impossible things. Things I had no choice but to believe. No one would come for me there.”

Ustin thought about the woman he had met in the aviary; dirty and proud, starving and strong, smelling of bodily waste while teasing a guardsman and a prince. He had met his mentor in the body of this scared young woman. He had so many questions, but his sorrow and weariness trumped his curiosity. “You will have to come with me.”

“Please,” she said again. “I only wish to go my way.”

“You are part of a mystery that must be solved,” Ustin told her. “I can’t let you go yet.”

Mitra’s eyes watered, but she managed not to let them spill over the brim of lids. Ustin moved the brass sword that had killed his mentor between Mitra’s rope belt and the remains of her shirt. She remained still and bit her lip. Ustin cut the roped and pulled it out from under her along with the soap and knife pouches that Ana, who was Sylva, had hung there. He slid the knife and soap pouches off and dropped the short sword behind him. Holding up the rope, he said, “Hands together, please.”

Mitra obeyed, and Ustin tied the prisoner's knot Master Ooris had taught him years before. He stood and pulled Mitra up by her bound hands. "You'll stay on the horse while I walk in front, holding the reins."

She nodded and Ustin helped her up. Then he turned his back on her while he picked up the soap, the knife, the bronze sword, the sheathe, his own hygiene kit, and his waterskin. He heard Mitra nudge his horse into a gallop as he knew she would. With his arms full, he turned and whistled the notes that always brought his brown and white mount back to him. The horse turned so quickly that Mitra nearly lost her seat. Ustin placed everything but the sword and sheathe in his saddle bags. The blade and its scabbard he fixed to his own belt. Then he took the reins of his horse and began walking east.

CHAPTER 27

THE NECROMANTIC BLADE

[Synopsis: Ustin and Mitra meet up with Prince Endegar who has lost Devika in Austweg. They visit the prophet's tower where Ustin finds out the prince knew about the knife's ability to exchange souls. He is angry with the prince for not trusting him and points out that he could have told "Ana's" secret had he known about the magical blade. Ustin returns to the service of Grand Master Elias in Kelkaam. Mitra is released. Endegar stays with the prophet who has promised to help him find Devika (and Sylva's body).]

CHAPTER 28

THE NEXT LEG OF THE JOURNEY

[Synopsis: Devika boards a ship for Tahpella.]